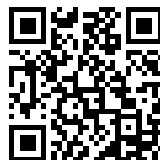

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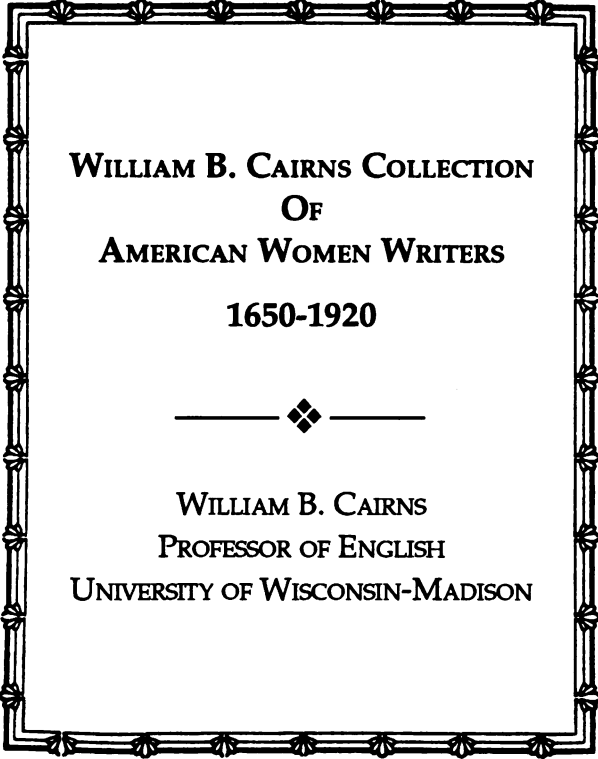
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The cover features a dark, textured background with a prominent embossed decorative border. The border is composed of intricate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral motifs, creating a rich, ornate frame around the central text. The text is centered within this frame.

COUSIN
WILHELMINA
SADLIER.



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COUSIN WILHELMINA

BY

ANNA T. SADLIER.

Author of
"The Lost Jewel of the Mortimers." "Arabella." etc.



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BOOK ONE.

COUSIN WILHELMINA

Chapter I.

THE HOUSE WITH THE PEACOCKS.

Strolling along through a once aristocratic quarter of New York which was no longer a residential district, but had been converted into a thoroughfare, Mr. Travers Preston stood regarding with interest a house, square and massive in its character and of the inevitable brown stone. It had no pretence to architectural elegance, it was quite guiltless of ornamentation, yet it bore, in its austere plainness, the sign manual of solid wealth and of gentility.

Travers Preston gave the dwelling his particular attention, because it reminded him very forcibly of his boyhood, when he had been a more or less frequent visitor to the mansion. It had been at that time the abode of a certain crusty old bachelor, whom he smiled even now to re-

call. Moreover there was something in the aspect of the place which appealed to the artistic soul that lay hidden away under the cynical and man-of-the-world exterior, which Travers Preston presented to the generality of his acquaintances. He had been absent a good deal from his native city, having spent years abroad, and he had not followed the fortunes of this house, nor of those who once made it their habitation. But he remembered many touching traditions connected therewith, as well as personalities who had played a considerable part in the social drama of the metropolis.

Though it was October, the grassy lawn upon which the edifice fronted was beautifully fresh and green, exquisitely soft and smooth. It extended around three sides of the dwelling, ending at either side in a brown, trellised fence, to which still clung a ragged vine. It was separated from the street by a low, iron railing, from the gateway whereof a short, stone paved path led directly to a flight of broad steps, and these in their turn to the massive entrance door.

As the critical observer gazed, two superb peacocks suddenly appeared, around the corner of the house, advancing with stately motion and long, graceful sweep of the tail. So curious is the association of ideas that the birds not only recalled to Travers Preston his boyhood, but re-

mind him likewise of an ancient palazzo, in a shaded street of Florence.

"Florence the beautiful," he murmured, and for an instant of delicious reverie, the Italian city was present to his mind, and those happenings, trivial and unimportant, yet pleasant, which had fixed that particular domicile in his memory. The sun glinted upon the gorgeous coloring of the peacocks as they strutted about in front of the mansion. They might have been guardian geni from that past to which the edifice properly belonged.

Some street urchins began to gather about, attracted partly by the peacocks, who were a perennial delight to them, and partly by the motionless figure of a gentleman, in faultless afternoon costume, from the tip of his top hat to the immaculate varnish of his shoes. They gathered in a group and regarded him in his absorption, but he gave no heed, and they, tired of staring, presently turned their undivided attention to the peacocks, saluting them with a shower of pebbles. The unoffending fowls, so assaulted, fled with shrill screams and ungainly movement around the the corner of the dwelling. Travers Preston, with that curious pang of regretful retrospection which is apt to recur to those who have passed the boundaries of early youth, remembered how he had done precisely the same thing,

more than "twenty golden years before." Nevertheless, he addressed a remonstrance to the boys, in behalf of the creatures who had fled so ignominiously.

Once roused from his abstraction, he became unpleasantly conscious that the lads had concentrated their attention upon him. Gathering together his energies, he strolled leisurely away, followed by sundry remarks from the urchins upon the shine of his boots and the lustre of his hat. Outwardly, at least, undisturbed, he pursued his way, the plate-glass windows of the house, lighted by the glare of the sun, seeming to stare after his retreating figure.

He had not gone far, when he met a carriage, a square, old-fashioned vehicle, drawn by two substantial horses advancing at a deliberate pace. The coachman and footman upon the box, likewise wore ancient but exceedingly correct livery. The pedestrian at once surmised that this equipage belonged to that dwelling, which had so fascinated him. He stood still, again, at a convenient distance, to observe its further progress and to note that it stopped, in fact, before the iron gateway. Travers Preston felt a distinct thrill of emotion. He scarcely knew what he expected, as the footman threw open the carriage door and slowly, leisurely a person was assisted to alight. It was a woman, frail, slight, ethereal,

of an almost startling emaciation, of an ivory-like whiteness of complexion, of a slow, yet peculiarly graceful movement, which even the febleness of age could not entirely disguise. She leaned upon the footman's arm, and so passed through the gate, up the broad steps and in at the door, which closed upon her. The observer had a curious feeling that it was like the closing of a chapter in a romance. He roused himself impatiently and went upon his way, walking at a rapid pace down Broadway to his handsome bachelor apartments, in Thirty-third Street near the Avenue.

It was not, however, until his dinner at the Club had been dispatched, and he had looked in for an hour at the opera house, that he finally found himself at leisure to think of the incident of the morning. He sat down in an arm chair to enjoy the luxury of a quiet smoke, and he opened one by one a pile of notes, which had accumulated upon his writing table. They inspired him with a peculiar distaste and seemed an impertinent interruption to his thoughts. They were chiefly invitations for various dates, requesting his presence at all sorts and varieties of functions, social and otherwise. They were an admirable illustration of the never ceasing treadmill in which the Gothamite of high social pretensions and abundant leisure is expected to

pass his days and a great portion of his nights as well.

Travers Preston had long passed the stage when he felt himself bound to accept invitations, merely because he had received them. He picked and chose as a connoisseur in gems might pick and choose amongst a brilliant collection. On this occasion, he dismissed them nearly all with cynical contempt, save the last, which, having opened and read, he held in his hand, thoughtfully, struck by a coincidence. It was suggested to him by his excellent memory that these Robinsons, who now invited him to dinner to meet some stranger of distinction, were allied to the very people who, at one time, inhabited the dwelling that had that morning attracted his attention.

Having settled the matter to his satisfaction, he at once wrote an acceptance, and ringing for his valet, caused it to be despatched. He could hardly have told himself why he did so. He had formerly, it is true, known the Robinsons very well, and had drifted away from them almost entirely. They had practically dropped out of his world and had been relegated, through inclination or force of circumstances, to a very quiet set. After he had despatched his acceptance, Travers Preston relapsed into careless ease, thoroughly enjoying his cigar.

He was a personage very much in demand in the social world of that metropolis from which he had been so frequently absent. Yet he was not so very young, having reached the sufficiently mature age of thirty-five, nor yet conspicuously handsome. On the contrary, he was usually regarded as singularly plain. His wealth, when measured by the set in which he chiefly moved, was inconsiderable, and he had neither business nor profession. But he had that quality, indefinable, but as tangible and as valuable as the diamonds of Golconda, of being a power amongst his fellows. It was universally conceded that he could do anything upon which he had set his mind, and win in any race. He had a talent for finance, or so, at least it seemed, from various fortunate investments. His fine taste in art and in music left little doubt that he might have met with eminent success in either of those directions. His friends always claimed that if he had been born poor, he would have shone resplendently somewhere. As it was, he languidly permitted himself to reflect other lights and was, as a moon, borrowing from many suns. He had chosen, in fact, to remain a dilettante.

For the rest, he possessed a never failing sympathy, a tact, a geniality and a polish of manner which resulted from culture, combined with cos-

mopolitan experience. He knew an immense number of people eminently worth knowing, in all the principal cities. Nevertheless he was the victim of a profound weariness, which he hid more or less successfully and of a cynicism, which was never aggressive.

Sitting there that evening alone, he recalled his life in its various phases, and he asked himself how it was that he had missed so many things which other men most highly valued. Love, domestic life, the companionship of some charming woman? He laughed softly to himself, as he answered the question by the very simple reflection that he had thus far seen no woman whose companionship he would have desired. In his secret communings, he admitted to himself, though he would not have declared his opinion to the world, that he did not believe in what is called love. Romantic attachments he held to be totally foreign to the age of the telephone and the telegraph. Marriage in modern life was at best the union of two congenial persons, who pledged themselves to make life as mutually agreeable as possible.

He smiled as he pulled from his pocket, a tiny peacock feather. He had put his hand through the iron railing and picked it up, after the peacocks had made their hurried exit from the lawn. He scarcely knew why he had taken

it and carried it away. He twirled it now thoughtfully in his fingers and recalled once more the Palazzo in Florence, where he had previously beheld a fine brood of these gorgeous fowls. That Palazzo had been the habitation of a very charming woman, a young American widow possessed of considerable attractions. Popular report, in that time and place, had declared that the young woman would have been quite willing to bestow herself upon Travers Preston, but he himself had touched very lightly upon this aspect of the question even in his own thoughts. For being a gentleman to the core, he was as far as possible removed from coxcombry.

He remembered this lady and her attractions as a very forcible illustration of his theories. He had very much enjoyed her society, but he had parted from her with the smallest modicum of regret. As she came now into his mind, with a kindly and perfectly respectful memory of the pleasure she had given him by her good comradeship, it suddenly occurred to him that she had conversed for a whole afternoon upon the very subject of that quaint, old house with the peacocks, in the very heart of New York. She had related many anecdotes of the family, who resided there, and in particular of a traditional beauty that some generations previous had taken

aristocratic New York by storm and had created a veritable furore amongst its young men.

Travers Preston had argued at the time that the youth of those by-gone generations must assuredly have been more impressionable, more romantic than those of the present, and that he could scarcely imagine the men of the new century becoming the victims of a grand passion. The lady had hotly contended for the existence of attachments as romantic and infatuations as complete in the twentieth century as at any other period of the world's history. She had, moreover, ventured the assertion that the man before her was an excellent subject for just such an attachment, possessing an artistic nature which is inevitably emotional, and a deep fund of feeling beneath a cynical exterior.

Evidently, as Travers Preston reflected, she had not been endowed with the spirit of prophecy. Here, after the lapse of some years, he was quite heart whole, entirely outside the range of feminine influence and in surroundings so congenial that he was not disposed to sacrifice the ease, luxury and freedom he enjoyed for any woman whatsoever. "Well," he cried, laughingly, "till the years roll backwards and age becomes youth, I shall never be in danger of heart-break for any woman."

He stuck the peacock's feather, cynically, in a

picture over the mantle-piece, as a gage of battle, a token of his high and puissant resolution. But he could not dismiss from his mind that by-gone beauty, whom he felt sure he had that day seen under the guise of an aged and fragile woman. She recurred to his mind in the full glory of her attractions, which had dazzled many a youth, and for which, if report spoke truth, more than one had wrecked his life.

In looking back upon that evening long after, Travers Preston frequently asked himself, if there are not moods of the human mind, phases of feeling through which it passes, that savor of prescience, that "in part are prophecy and in part are longings wild and vain."

Chapter II.

MISUNDERSTANDING.

Precisely at twenty-five minutes past seven, Mr. Travers Preston found himself ringing the bell of a substantial brown stone mansion in the newer quarter of Manhattan, where handsome residences extend downwards almost to the water front. He stood upon the steps and looked past the broad driveway to where the North River glistened in the last, faint rays of the evening sunshine. A deep, red glow was just fading over the cold gray of the water. The dinner guest sighed, his thoughts going back a decade of years to a time when the Robinsons had inhabited a commodious dwelling in an old but very aristocratic quarter of the town.

“What jolly times we used to have there,” he reflected. “I was in the early twenties.”

His reflections were cut short by the opening of the door, and he passed in from the last gleam of the dying sunset, contrasted with the pale gray of the water and the leaden dullness of the pavement, to the warmth and comfort of a

substantial interior. The soft pile of the Moquette carpets, the glare of multitudinous electric lights, softened and shaded, told of wealth and luxury. Yet once again the new arrival sighed for that far less pretentious mansion, where he had been entertained of yore, and for a past in which he had been young.

Most of the other guests, including the distinguished stranger, were already assembled in the drawing-room, and the womenkind of the household were somewhat flustered, it must be owned, by the advent of this pink of fashion, the courted, the fastidious. Mr. Appleby Robinson was quite undisturbed by the event. He had been very intimate with Travers Preston in the old days, and their intimacy had waned and died for no particular reason save that the former, who was older, had become a family man and had settled down into comfortable obscurity, whereas the latter had gone forward into the very inner circle of fashion, had traveled much, had sojourned amongst the great of the earth, and had dwelt conspicuously in the atmosphere of purple and fine linen.

The host, recalling the past, gave the guest a very cheery and cordial greeting, to which the latter responded in his best manner. After his easy fashion he fell at once into the position of an old family friend, and so put even the most

timid at their ease. . He made himself charming to all that company, but he entered into particularly amicable relations with the eldest daughter of the house, Miss Mary Appleby Robinson. That young woman was plain and sensible and not likely to be diverted from her ordinary way by the attentions of this brilliant meteor of fashion. During the course of the dinner, he was at some pains to draw out the distinguished stranger upon his travels, but having paid him due attention, as the occasion befitted, he took the first opportunity of broaching to his host the subject which was uppermost in his own mind. He put a discreet question about the house with the peacocks, to which Appleby Robinson responded heartily:

“Oh, yes, old fellow, you must remember that is Cousin Wilhelmina’s house.”

“I vaguely remember that the house belonged to some of your people,” Travers Preston replied, “but I don’t think I ever knew a Cousin Wilhelmina.”

“She was away from New York a great deal,” the host explained. “In fact she only came back permanently after my Uncle Jerry died.”

“Oh, I knew your Uncle Jerry well,” cried the other genially. “It was in his time I was at the house. He used to give us youngsters a quarter or fifty cents to buy sweets, al-

ways with a homily against the use of tobacco."

"Why, to be sure! poor uncle had the strongest antipathy to the weed. He caught me once smoking, and he threatened to thrash me if I ever so much as looked at a cigarette. Bless his innocent heart, he little guessed what a smoker I should become."

"He wasn't very successful with any of his neophytes, then. Persuasion and sweetmeats were as unavailing in my case as threats in yours."

In the pause which followed, the last speaker was revolving in his mind the form of a question which he presently put:

"Was that old lady whom I saw getting out of a carriage in front of the house this morning, your Uncle Jerry's sister?"

"Getting out at the door of the old house? Was she very fair, very frail, very ethereal?"

"Precisely."

"Then that was my Uncle Jerry's niece. She was always called Cousin Wilhelmina in the family, though Jerry was my grand-uncle."

"Oh, that's it!" Travers Preston exclaimed. "I am getting on, as the phrase is, to your family connections."

"Yes, Jerry left her the old house and all his money, though they quarreled persistently during life, and never stayed together for more than

a few weeks. The old boy regarded her as the type feminine, which he professed to abhor. He condemned what he called her frivolities, and was exasperated beyond measure by her conquests over the sterner sex."

The host's attention was here called to some other guest and the subject was not resumed. After dinner Mr. Travers Preston devoted himself to Miss Mary, partly with a view to that fascinating topic which occupied his mind. He was literally haunted, indeed, by the remembrance of that fragile figure, so aged, so dainty, so delicate, a veritable walking compendium of the social history of her set, a living illustration of the transitory glory of this nether world. Of course, this absorption did not appear. Few could guess the current of Travers Preston's thoughts, unless he chose to give the indication. In the drawing-room, after dinner, he asked Miss Mary Robinson to sing. She complied at once, allowing him to choose for her a favorite of his own. It was a German romance, full of chords and harmony, which, nevertheless, required softness and delicacy of execution, alternating with fire and intensity. Miss Mary warned him:

"I have only a puppet's voice, a mere drawing-room trifle."

The man of the world looked down at the

young girl kindly. She was certainly plain, all the Robinsons were, and no doubt she was quite correct in the estimate she gave of her voice. But there was a saving grace, all too rare, in her acknowledgment of deficiency, in her very recognition of her own limitations, just as there was a compensation for her plainness in the kindly and vivacious expression of her eyes. He was a finished connoisseur in music and frequently had to endure veritable torture from amateurs of his acquaintance. He had schooled himself, however, against such afflictions and now responded most pleasantly:

“You must sing it and allow me to judge. It is a lovely thing.”

“You should hear Cousin Wilhelmina sing that,” cried the girl, with enthusiasm. Travers Preston gave her a startled glance, as Mary continued:

“She has a wonderful voice.”

“It must be wonderful, indeed, if she can render that at her age,” said the connoisseur, abstractedly, thinking of the dainty anachronism whom he had seen mounting the sunlit steps, with the frail form and white face, white with the pallor of age, a gem of which the setting was the quaint mansion and the superb pair of peacocks. The girl regarded him curiously:

"Has age anything to do with one's singing?" she inquired.

"Why, necessarily, a voice must lose something of its range and considerable, if not all, of its power, with advancing years."

"Cousin Wilhelmina's voice hasn't lost anything!" Mary cried, emphatically, and this time the bored man of fashion smiled upon the young girl. That smile of his was a distinct attraction, it lighted up a plain face and a decidedly unclassical set of features. There was something so genuine in the girl's hearty praise and in that affection for her cousin which would not permit her to recognize even the ravages of time.

"You might let me hear you sing in the meantime," Travers Preston said, "until I have the good fortune to hear your wonderful cousin."

"She *is* wonderful in every way!" Miss Mary exclaimed, with decision.

"Age cannot wither nor custom stale her infinite variety," the man quoted amusedly to himself, but Mary persisted:

"You will think so, too, when you know her."

"I am quite sure of that, and I hope the pleasure will not be too long deferred," Travers Preston responded, quite sincerely. He was deeply interested in learning more of that relic,

which had survived in the swirl of the huge metropolis, a phantom of that older society which had retained the archaic quality of the early colonial era. He dimly remembered, moreover, the interior of that ancient dwelling, where he had gone as a boy and where he had partaken of Uncle Jerry's bounties.

"You must manage for me a meeting with this fascinating Cousin Wilhelmina," Travers Preston continued. "Does she receive at all?"

"Not so very often. She will not be bound by rules. Of course, there are the Thursday evening receptions, but you cannot be sure of finding her there."

"Hamlet, with the Prince of Denmark left out. But if you will be good enough to introduce me, I shall have to take my chances. You can introduce me as a duly accredited old friend of the family."

"That will be a recommendation. She likes everything old and connected with the past."

"Naturally," assented Travers Preston, wondering how old the girl thought he was, while she, in turn, cast a curious look at him.

"Many men have been fascinated by Cousin Wilhelmina," Mary went on, thoughtfully, "though I have known a few to dislike her intensely. She has a singular charm about her."

“An archaic charm?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Mary replied, doubtfully. “Though I have heard that remark made about her before, I can’t see that it’s so very appropriate. Some one said she was an anachronism. Wasn’t that a peculiar compliment?”

“She matches that delightful old house and the peacocks,” answered Travers Preston, evasively, “but, meantime, I have not had my song.”

“I do not think I shall sing the one you have chosen,” objected Mary, “in case you should ever hear Wilhelmina sing it. I have heard men say that they felt like falling at her feet when she sang that song.”

“She must be a remarkable old woman,” thought the man, but he merely urged Mary Robinson to choose one of her own favorites, and he listened with the best grace and a certain degree of pleasure to her rendering of a simple, pathetic, little romanza. When taking his leave he remarked to his host:

“Miss Mary has promised to take me some Thursday evening to call upon Cousin Wilhelmina.”

“That’s right! That’s right!” agreed Mr. Robinson, jovially. “But don’t go too late, or the old lady may have put on her night-cap. If she isn’t there, you miss the genuine flavor of the place.”

“Yes, I can quite fancy that, and when I go to see Cousin Wilhelmina, I shall try to ensure her being there, at least so far as depends upon me.”

“She is usually at her post,” Mr. Robinson declared. “She is well preserved, though a bit rheumatic, when the weather’s going to change, and I don’t think her teeth are all her own, and I believe she wears a wig.”

“I am to hear her sing,” Travers Preston observed, with a twinkle in his eye.

Mr. Robinson went off into a very peal of laughter. “Oh, I guess she’ll spare you that,” he cried. “She was a singer once, but her pipes have worn rusty in these fifty or sixty years.”

Travers Preston went out of the house, wondering at the power of hero-worship. How could that young creature, with her honest eyes and the ring of absolute conviction in her voice, assure him that men had felt inclined to throw themselves at the feet of this etherealized mummy when she sang. He laughed as he lit a cigar, and yet he was thoughtful, too. The phantom of a by-gone personality must still hang about this old woman and attract the young by its glamour. He was more than ever desirous of paying the promised visit. That house with the peacocks might have been a dwelling of enchantment devised by ancient necromancers, so com-

pletely had it seized upon his fancy. The red glow was gone from the sky, and the river lay a dark streak, brightened only by the reflection of lights from the shore.

Travers Preston walked on a few blocks, and hailing a Broadway cable car, was borne downwards between the rows of brilliantly lighted shops and hotels, at the doors of which stood groups of men. In the car, half a dozen acquaintances claimed recognition from the man of fashion. He merely nodded in response to their greetings. He was in no mood for conversation. His interest was absorbed by that new theme, and a new theme to an imagination which is jaded, and a mind which is overborne by a multitude of successive thoughts and images, is always a powerful stimulus. And yet, if he had asked himself in that subtle self-analysis to which he was so prone, why that house and its aged occupant had thus interested him, he could have given no satisfactory explanation whatever. He had only a block to walk eastward, after leaving the car, before reaching his apartments. He was all unaware that through the fortuitous circumstances of having passed by the house with the peacocks and paused to gaze thereupon, he had become merely another illustration of the fact that what is vulgarly and with unconscious paganism called Fate, attends upon

a man's every movement. "For whereso'er his feet may stray, unseen Fate goeth, too."

Chapter III.

A WEIRD IMPRESSION.

Very shortly after Miss Mary Appleby Robinson received a note from Mr. Travers Preston, asking if she would appoint the following Thursday to call upon Cousin Wilhelmina. She replied in the affirmative, and mentioned an hour, at which, most punctually, her escort presented himself, and together the pair employed that commonplace medium of the cable-car to lead them into the realm of enchantment. They had to walk a block or two and they conversed quite gravely and earnestly, interestedly enough too, on the ordinary sights and sounds which met their view. Travers Preston, in his character of old friend of the family, indulged in a few reminiscences concerning Miss Mary's father, with whom, despite the disparity of years, he had been more than commonly intimate. When the two reached their destination, they paused an instant, by mutual consent, before ascending the steps and looked towards the house, which seemed decidedly commonplace by

night. It was enveloped completely by the darkness, the peacocks had vanished, there was, in fact, no outward nor visible sign that it differed from any other dwelling. The front windows were veiled by heavy curtains, in the region of the drawing-room, so as to exclude, in a fashion that has become obsolete, even the slightest glimpse of the interior. That desire of privacy has indeed, in wonderful degree, vanished from modern existence. Each one would apparently lead his life in the full glare of the footlights. He would have his portrait in the illustrated papers and his doings chronicled in the social column. If he asks a friend or two to dine, he no longer draws the curtains upon their intimate talk over the wine and the walnuts, but it is paragraphed in the daily papers, the lime-light of publicity is turned thereupon, and it shines upon the lady in her boudoir and the author in his sanctum.

Travers Preston was conscious of a peculiar tremor, as he stood upon the steps, in the slight interval between the ringing of the bell and the opening of the door. He felt as if he were upon the threshold of some new and singular experience and the confident man of the world, who was a stranger in no continent nor city upon the globe, found himself abashed, intimidated to an inexplicable extent.

There was nothing extraordinary in the interior presently revealed to Miss Mary and her companion by a solemn man in livery. The rooms were spacious and lofty, the walls adorned after a heavily flowered design, which recalled a remote period and ante-dated recent evolutions in wall-papering. Candelabra of silver adorned either end of the mantle-piece, crystal chandeliers hung from the centre of the ceilings, sconces were placed at intervals, and from all of these old fashioned contrivances glowed the lustre of numberless wax-lights. These details were at once apparent to Mr. Travers Preston, but their quaintness impressed him less than the air of modernity which underlay everything. In what it precisely consisted he could scarcely have explained, but it was there, and it couldn't be dispelled, even by that central figure occupying the corner of the room.

This was the identical old lady who had been assisted up the steps by the footman. To this personage Miss Robinson immediately presented her escort, as an old friend of the family, but who, like herself, had lived much abroad. While in the very act of bowing before the mistress of the house, Travers Preston was conscious of a keen disappointment, as though he had expected something different. He smiled at the notion, since here, indeed, he was

confronted by the veritable Cousin Wilhelmina.

He strove to recall what Appleby Robinson had told him on the previous evening, when they had taken supper together at the Club. He had described Cousin Wilhelmina's appearance at a ball given at the White House in Washington, during the administration of President Buchanan, of which she had been the belle. It was at the time, when the brilliant Harriet Lane, niece to the chief magistrate, had lent a charm to the various social functions of the presidential mansion, and this particular ball was long remembered. Cousin Wilhelmina wore upon that occasion, a gown of flame-colored satin and a necklace of blood-red rubies. The fire of those jewels had gleamed and glowed through the ball-room. Like the beauty of the wearer, they caught and held the eyes of every one. There had been, as traditions of that era averred, a weird charm about the beauty, accentuated by that something, *outré* and bizarre, in her costume.

Travers Preston, with an artistic sense, which was almost painfully acute, had seized upon that description and carried it with him, during the hours intervening between the hearing of the story and standing in cousin Wilhelmina's presence.

All day, as he came and went through the busy thoroughfares of the vast metropolis, where

crowds jostled each other, where men and women hurried along, careless of each other's identity, heedless of the varied thoughts and impressions, unconscious of the tragedy or comedy embodied by individual lives, Travers Preston was beset by this same dominating impression, the shadow of this same personality.

The old lady sat huddled in her chair, a mass of rich silk, softened by a frou-frou of lace and chiffon, and having as little as possible in common with that vanished figure of which the man before her had been dreaming. At first sight, there was not even a trace remaining of that radiant creature, who, in spite of a somewhat outré costume, or aided by the bold effect of the flame-colored satin and rubies, had carried all before her on the night of a long past ball. On closer inspection, however, Travers Preston's keen gaze perceived a hint of past attractiveness in the wan and faded face, wrinkled infinitesimally, while the dimmed eyes shot forth flashes of a once vivacious wit. He heard his name pronounced quite clearly and distinctly, in a voice which quavered slightly, and he was half-startled by familiar reference to a subject which he would scarcely have expected to come within Cousin Wilhelmina's range of thought. He wondered how this old woman, living in the comparative obscurity to which age condemns the

most brilliant, could have kept pace with such up-to-date occurrences. They belonged entirely to that meteor-like pathway of fashion, which he himself was treading. The lights which illumine it are never fixed stars, the disturbances are but transitory; the newest, the most brilliant planets shine but a brief time and stars even of the first magnitude suffer all too speedy an eclipse.

Sitting down and entering into conversation with the mistress of the mansion, the fastidious man's attention was riveted at once by the old woman's fine and perfect courtesy, while the smile upon her worn face made the stories told by Appleby Robinson probable. Still there was a very great distinction between that and Miss Mary's extravagant appreciation of her kinswoman. She was a well preserved ruin, only that and nothing more. The thought of Miss Mary suggested to him another idea, and, impelled by curiosity, he took his courage in his hand and asked the old lady if she would favor him with a song. The aged face from out its disguises of chiffon, was turned upon him with an expression at once pathetic and amused: "Why, sir!" she exclaimed, "you are a walking anachronism, if you will permit me the freedom to call you so. You are an echo! You speak with a phantom voice. It is well nigh half a

century since I have heard such a request, and I regret, sincerely regret, Mr. Travers Preston, that I must refuse what forty years ago it would have been a pleasure to grant."

Muttering an excuse, confused beyond measure, the unlucky gentleman cast a resentful glance towards Miss Mary Appleby Robinson, who was standing at the other side of the room. He suspected that she had been amusing herself at his expense. Yet there she was, apparently so innocent of any offence, smiling towards him, with a frank and genuine countenance. It was not the first time, however, in his experience, that open and ingenuous physiognomies had concealed every manner of deception. Miss Mary seemed, indeed, rather careless of him and his doings, turning back again, after that fleeting smile, to converse interestedly with a clever looking man in spectacles who stood beside her.

The drawing room, on that occasion, was tolerably well filled; there was a sprinkling of very smart and up-to-date people, who deplored the dullness, but were, nevertheless, complimented by an invitation to the Thursdays, and felt it incumbent upon them to "show up" there. There were likewise, a collection of the most intensely conservative and aristocratic of Gothamites, who affected to be unaware of the existence of many of those who figured in the society

journals, and who maintained their attitude of severe disapproval towards those journals themselves. Some of them had a quaint look, as if they had stepped out of the pages of Washington Irving, or escaped from some volume of Hawthorne and were themselves "twice told tales." It seemed as if they might be living over again, a second life, quite distinct and separate in its details, from the life of their youth and maturity.

Travers Preston knew nearly every one present, as, indeed, despite his prolonged absences, he knew most people. Little coteries, in dim corners of the room, were speedily engaged in telling each other about the mother and grandmother of this latest guest, who made his first appearance at the Thursdays. They dismembered his genealogical tree, after the manner of good Americans, and discoursed upon its various branches. Many in the assembly marveled to see him there at all; some, and these were the younger men, suspected what they presumed to be the cause of his coming, and smiled knowingly at his supposed discomfiture. Travers Preston was, however, as unconscious of their surmises as he was indifferent to the genealogical gossip amongst the dowagers.

He was, in truth, quite careless of these advantages of ancestry which he possessed, though possibly he was glad to know of their

existence in certain crises of his life, just as an armorer is well pleased to have effective weapons in his collection, even though they should never be used. He did not require them. He had mastered the situation, chiefly by his own personality and without the help of these adventitious aids. He stood securely upon the apex of fashion, at an altitude which would have made most men giddy. But his cosmopolitan training had taught him the just value of things and made him far too wise to lose his equilibrium. Secure upon that lofty eminence, he deliberately cultivated the social virtues, as a gardener in a hot-house cultivates choice blooms.

Weary as he was of most things, the old dwelling interested him, and he carried away its every detail, as though it had been a shrine in a far country. It reminded him of his youth, for it had not materially changed since he had stood there, a growing lad, to receive uncle Jerry's tips and gratuitous advice. He had looked upon all things, then, with the magnifying glass of youth. Uncle Jerry had been a potentate, and his drawing-room the abode of greatness. Now it was like looking through the other end of the glass, which diminishes the view and sadly alters the perspective. Yet the house was not disappointing. It fitted admirably with his dreams. It possessed an atmosphere which was

what the French call *saisissant*. It literally seized and held him in conjunction with that figure in the arm chair, guarded in its corner by two tall statues in antique bronze, upon which fell the light of countless tapers.

As he looked each time at Cousin Wilhelmina he caught himself wondering how it would all have been, if he had been alive when she was sunny eighteen, and whether or no he would have been one of the throng of admirers who pressed round the belle of the flame-colored satin and the rubies. It was an uncanny feeling to enter the mind of a man, who belonged so entirely to the twentieth century. He speculated idly, what fortune he would have had; whether he should have been but a unit amongst many lovers, or the one pre-eminently whom she would have singled out for her favor. He laughed as he found himself enjoying retrospectively that hypothetical struggle, and obeying a signal from Miss Mary that it was time to go, advanced to take leave of the mistress of the house. As he bowed before the frail figure to say good-night, he perceived that it was merely pathetic and weary, with the weariness of accumulated years. A white hand was extended to him, so small, so fragile, he could have crushed it in his own. The eyes raised to his face held him with that reflected charm, from the long ago, when they had

been beautiful, the voice, trained and modulated to habitual melody, addressed him:

“I was your grandmother’s bridesmaid, my dear Mr. Travers Preston,” she said, “So you perceive that we are almost related. You will come again and see me, will you not?”

He promised readily, his mind still a trifle bewildered between the picture which it had so graphically conjured up and the present, which was its antithesis. He could scarcely determine which was real and which unreal. This confusion of ideas, therefore, left upon his faculties a very weird impression.

Chapter IV.

FURTHER MYSTIFICATION.

On the way home, Mr. Travers Preston was disposed to be a little dry with Miss Robinson. He fancied she had been attempting a practical joke upon him in the matter of her cousin's singing, and he had been led into making what the mistress of the ancient mansion evidently regarded as an absurd request. Moreover, he felt indisposed for conversation. The whole scene presented by those brilliantly lighted streets and the throngs of people seemed intensely commonplace. Just as eyes which have been blinded by the glare of the footlights, or a mind that has been absorbed in an engrossing drama, discovers ordinary life to be both tame and uninteresting.

George Washington upon his time-worn steed of bronze, now lighted by electricity, which in that warrior's day and generation would have appeared magical; Broadway, with its shops closed, indeed, but sending forth, nevertheless, brilliant flashes of light; the square with its fountains, all appeared indescribably prosaic. It

must be owned that he had the same impression as regarded the conversation of poor, little Miss Robinson. She, on her part, felt a sudden awe of her too brilliant companion, who occasionally remembered the demands of civility and addressed a few words to her. Because of her supposed attempt to practice upon his credulity, he did not in any way refer to Cousin Wilhelmina.

When the two had gone a few blocks in this desultory fashion, Mr. Preston suddenly remembered that his companion lived at 85th street, and with many apologies for his absentmindedness, hailed a passing car. When they had alighted again, and were walking westward towards the Robinsons' house, the girl suddenly broke silence, taking, as it were, the bull by the horns.

"So," she said, disappointedly, "you did not hear her sing after all."

"Not being a necromancer," Travers Preston replied curtly. Miss Robinson looked at him, but his face was inscrutable. She ventured further.

"I know you would have enjoyed it so much."

"Enjoyed the quavers particularly," the man responded sardonically, "but there, I mustn't be brutal, and she is charming."

Mary Robinson thought her escort's style of conversation was peculiar and pondered an instant upon the quavers. Referring, however, to

the adjective which he had used, she began:

“I didn’t know—”

“Know what, my dear Miss Mary?”

“That you knew her.”

“Why, my dear child,” cried Travers Preston irritably, “can one ever be said to know a mere drawing room acquaintance?”

“I suppose not,” Mary agreed, “yet people, when they meet her first, always seem to form a very decided opinion of herself and of her beauty.”

“The beauty of an Arctic night, moonlight on the snow.”

“I wonder,” cried Mary indignantly, “why people always speak of her as cold, whereas, she is the warmest-hearted, the most charitable, the most indulgent; even in her judgments of others she is invariably kind.”

“No doubt,” commented Travers Preston, “your cousin sees things through the chastened light of experience, which has a wonderful power to soften crudities of every sort. Just as a charitable person sees the faults and follies of others, through the glow of mercy. I have observed a Sister of Charity in a hospital, abroad, bending over some loathsome object, her face transfigured by the light within.”

“Cousin Wilhelmina is very charitable,” Mary declared, “you know, or, perhaps, you don’t

know, that she is a Catholic, and like most of the Romanists, she believes a lot of queer things."

"I have a pretty shrewd idea of what all those queer things are," Travers Preston answered, "since I am a Romanist myself."

He gave a distinct shock to Miss Mary by this declaration. She could scarcely believe that this idol of fashion, absolutely belonged to the "Romish" church. Her companion laughed.

"You are marvelling," he said, "that anybody could profess so unfashionable a creed, but fashion is merely local in such matters, and, indeed, it is an absurdity to mention the word in such a connection."

Mary Robinson, not knowing precisely what to say, held her peace, while the man beside her continued:

"I know what a good woman of my own faith would feel and how she would act in many circumstances. I can appreciate her far off and at a distance. I only wish I had lived up to my belief. I have often envied the faith and fervor of some poor, old Irishwoman or of a crippled beggar whom I used to see in the portico of San Pietro, at Rome." He broke off abruptly, fearing that he had spoken with too great warmth; then, he added in a lighter tone:

"My dear child, you are too young to have observed it, but there has been an evolution. It is

distinctly fashionable now in England and even in New York to belong to the ancient faith."

Mary was hardly prepared to believe so startling a statement, even on authority so unimpeachable. She belonged to a conservative set, which took but little heed of the notes, intellectual and religious, of modern progress. To her a Catholic was and always would be, "a Galilean," whom even "his speech doth betray." She had always regarded Cousin Wilhelmina as the solitary exception, to which must now be added Mr. Travers Preston. She did not pursue the subject, however, but she marvelled at the glow upon her companion's cheek and the light in his eye. He did not often warm up in this fashion and despite her prejudices, the girl liked him the better for the circumstance.

"You seem to be in earnest about your religion," she presently volunteered,

"I, in earnest? Why, no, Miss Mary, I am in earnest about nothing in particular. I always fancy myself in the position of Undine, in the German fable, who was without a soul. If I were to find one suddenly—" He did not finish the sentence, but exclaimed, instead, after a pause:

"Meantime, I am nominally a Catholic. Believe me, it is the only genuine religion. If it were false, Christianity itself would be a myth."

With this declaration, he left the astonished Miss Mary at her own door. He descended the steps to the sub-way after that and took a down train, ensconcing himself very comfortably while the train swept on through the night, he still conjured up the image of the old lady, who had so vividly impressed him. It seemed to him almost that behind her arm chair, side by side with those statues of antique bronze, was the figure of her youth, resplendent in a flame colored satin, her throat encircled by blood-red rubies, while eyes, gloriously beautiful, flashing out merriment or breathing sadness, regarded him with a smile in their depths.

Chapter V.

SEEING VISIONS.

Almost every day, Travers Preston made it a point to visit the stock exchange, to stroll in and out of brokers' offices, to place money here and there, to dabble in stocks, after his dilettante fashion, and to indulge, according to his mood, in more or less daring ventures. The atmosphere of the place was distasteful, though he went into these ventures with a certain fire and enthusiasm, but he sincerely pitied the men who spent their lives there, entirely occupied with these affairs.

And, though this busy market place of finance was about the last in the world, as might be supposed, to favor romance, Travers Preston found himself haunted even there by the twofold image of Cousin Wilhelmina, old, feeble and faded as he had seen her, and young, smiling and beautiful, as he could have imagined her to have been in her youth. He was the more surprised at this persistent obsession of his faculties by this one idea, because he had never been particularly susceptible to feminine influence and admired

living beauties in very much the same impersonal fashion as their painted prototypes on the walls of galleries. The matter had, however, given him a new interest. It uplifted him above the commonplace and prosaic. It redeemed the commercialism of jostling, bustling, down town. The spires of old Trinity, outlined against the sunset sky, the pealing of its bells, the very rush and roar of busy humanity, had a new meaning to his mind.

He was conscious of an almost boyish eagerness in pursuit of this topic of interest, and looked forward to those occasions which he deliberately planned for the investigation of the subject. He was most anxious to hear all about the family, and particularly whatsoever related to that brilliant past, which was the atmosphere surrounding Wilhelmina. A soft nebulous atmosphere, indeed, but in some mysterious fashion, stimulating and invigorating. He neglected most of his fashionable acquaintances, though he often obtained from those whom he still saw, odd bits of information, which fitted in, mosaic like, with the matter that was occupying his thoughts. He employed the privilege of an old friend, in taking Miss Mary Appleby Robinson to the theatre, to concerts or lectures. He also enjoyed many a quiet smoke with his old time friend, her father. On such occasions he was sure to draw

his comrade out upon the subject of Wilhelmina, her attractions and her conquests. Sometimes, there was an allusion which puzzled him, but he asked no questions, only pondering over it in silence. Amongst other incidents, Appleby Robinson related how the beauty, then young, had had her picture painted by some noted artist of the day in her ball gown of flame colored satin and the rubies.

As the elder man rambled on garrulously in his pleasant, desultory fashion, he could guess nothing of the thoughts that lay hidden behind the impassive face of his listener, with its irregular features and almost swarthy complexion, suggesting strength in its very ruggedness. The actual sensations he did produce were the last that would have occurred to unimaginative Mr. Robinson. He would have seriously questioned his friend's sanity, if he could have been made aware of his reflections.

"You must see Wilhelmina's portrait," he declared, "since you are interested in the matter; that will give you a better idea of how she actually looked than anything I can say. Get the little girl to show it to you, next time you go down there."

Travers Preston, supposing that Mr. Robinson was referring to his daughter, as the little girl, readily agreed to obtain her good offices in the

matter of the portrait, a resolve which made him look forward all the more eagerly to the next occasion upon which it would be permissible to call at the house with the peacocks. He, however, of his own accord, turned the conversation to subjects remote from that which they had been discussing. The beef trust, with its relation to society, and the various opinions, humorous or otherwise, concerning that weighty question which had been ventilated in the newspapers, formed, just then, a very absorbing topic in the United States generally and in New York in particular. The younger man discussed it in a whimsical, half-satirical manner, veiling the soundness of his views under the lightness of his tone.

He also took up in detail, a scheme which a promoter had that forenoon placed before him, and he pointed out its various deficiencies with an acumen which his older companion could not sufficiently admire. The latter thought within himself that surely his old acquaintance was a most long-headed fellow, and that he seemed to get to the bottom of every subject, especially such as related to business.

The long-headed gentleman had, as has been seen in the course of this narrative, his own leaven of folly, and Mr. Appleby Robinson's opinion might have been somewhat modified, if

he could have observed him the very next morning, going a considerable distance out of his way to take a peep at the fascinating mansion which had so powerfully attracted him. Its windows stared out upon the thoroughfare, like huge, unseeing eyes, reflecting the brilliant sunshine vividly. The peacocks disported themselves in the light and warmth, uplifting their glorious tails, upon which the sunbeams glinted, and brought forth the rainbow coloring. Slowly they allowed their magnificent plumes to fall to earth again, with a swishing sound, and in evident, ostentatious vanity, paraded up and down, satisfied with the effect they had produced. The observer thought, with a smile, of the peacock feather, which he had placed as a gage of battle over the picture in his room, and he recalled likewise once more the Palazzo at Florence, and its fair occupant, who had predicted to him that he would inevitably find himself at some time infatuated by some woman. His smile broadened into a laugh, and then he threw back his head, with genial defiance.

It was a short time after this little bit of by-play, that his obliging young friend, Mary Robinson, accompanied him once more to the reception rooms of Cousin Wilhelmina. The place was crowded that evening, and amidst the stir

and bustle, the chatter of well-bred voices and the sound of light laughter, Travers Preston vaguely perceived that many of the guests hurried towards the second drawing room, where there seemed to be some special attraction. He supposed that it was a pianist or other musician, who was thus drawing away the majority of the assemblage. Mary Robinson had left him and likewise wended her way to the regions beyond the portieres, so that he could not get any information from her. He felt disinclined, just then, to listen to music, and he, therefore, occupied himself in observing the people, until he could find an opportunity to seat himself beside the mistress of the household.

Her conversation was delightful, though her soft, high-bred tones quavered away into tremolo at intervals. She lightly touched upon reminiscences, whence the personal note was almost entirely eliminated. They brought back, with singularly graphic reality, those famous men and women who glided through the mazes of American society, under various administrations in Washington, or through numberless seasons in New York. Gratified by the marked attentions which Travers Preston paid her and the subtle flattery of his interest in her narrative, she exerted herself to the utmost to please and entertain. One thing, however, struck the man who

listened, the undercurrent of weary discontent, of absolute disenchantment with life, of hopelessness and cynicism, which underlay the polished discourse. They accorded but ill with certain things, which Mary Robinson had said of Cousin Wilhelmina, and they jarred upon him, coming from a Catholic. Ordinarily, even the most worldly and frivolous women of that age, give some hint that they are occupied with the great realities. Indifferent as Travers Preston had permitted himself to become to the practice of his religion, he could not help experiencing a sense of shock, and a curious feeling of helpless pity. He reflected that this old woman was the product and outcome of the very life he himself was leading. Her curt dismissal of even the faintest reference to the eternal verities, her gentle satirical attitude towards the clergy, perfectly high-bred and courteous, but utterly skeptical of their powers and their sincerity, jarred upon the Catholic sensibilities, which were deadened, but not extinguished in Mr. Travers Preston.

He recalled with tender reverence his own mother, with her high ideals and her beautiful spirituality, ever deepening as the shadows of age darkened around her, and shining as a light upon "the holy candlestick," through the gloom. Of course, he gave no indication of the current of his thoughts. When he mentioned the por-

trait and his desire to see it, Cousin Wilhelmina cried emphatically :

“Make her show it to you! Make her show it to you!”

As before, he presumed the person meant was Miss Mary Appleby Robinson, and he agreed:

“I shall most certainly ask her to let me have a look at it.”

“She is not always in a compliant mood about such things, my dear Mr. Travers Preston,” Cousin Wilhelmina said with a smile.

“Is she not? Why, I had fancied her the very soul of good nature.”

“Perhaps your powers of persuasion are unusual, or that you have chanced to meet her when her mood was compliant. Do you know her very well?”

There was a spice of curiosity in the old lady’s tone which puzzled the man beside her.

“Our acquaintance has been brief,” he answered, “but I have been privileged in falling into the position of an old family friend.”

“Yes, that would account for it,” the old lady answered, “she is very fond of old family friends and of all that pertains to the past.”

Travers Preston looked at her. He remembered how Miss Mary had said precisely the same thing to him of Cousin Wilhelmina. They were a mysterious family evidently, given to fads and

theories. Yet one would scarcely have been inclined to formulate a theory about Miss Mary, who was so sensible and discreet and—prosaic.

“She is somewhere in the other room, I believe,” continued the old lady, “holding a court of her own. You will find most of the younger men there, no doubt, and some of the older ones as well. That is the privilege of youth and beauty, is it not, sir?”

“Yes, yes,” the man assented, absently, wondering at this new and extravagant presentment of his very ordinary looking little friend. “Youth and beauty are wonderful potentates. The one, however, is hopelessly doomed, but the other in your fortunate sex may remain indefinitely.”

He threw back his head, as he delivered the compliment, with a gesture that was usually considered a special attraction in this finished man of the world, and his smile, half humorous, half tender, brought an answering smile to the fragile face, fine and delicate, as the aroma of faded flowers.

“You are a sad flatterer, Mr. Travers Preston,” declared Cousin Wilhelmina, “but you would find a much greater exercise for that pretty wit in the other room. I assure you, sir, you would discover there what would try your mettle.”

He was almost wroth with her for assuming that he should be so easily worsted, and at so very trivial a game.

Did she, with all her experience, for an instant imagine—. He stopped. Even in thought he was loath to disparage his obliging little friend, who had guided him into this palace of enchantment. But really it was too absurd. Cousin Wilhelmina must have presumed from the fact of his appearing in Miss Mary's company so often that he was that young lady's devoted admirer.

"I am so old a fighter that I have laid down my arms," Travers Preston carelessly observed. "I am merely an interested spectator of 'life's subtle game.' "

"I perceive you have read a poet who was widely quoted in my youth," said Cousin Wilhelmina, "but if you will forgive my capping your quotation, I do not agree that there are others 'fitter far to play life's subtle game.' I venture to surmise that you are well equipped for it at every point, and as for your span of years, what is it when compared with mine?"

There was an intense melancholy in her tone, and once more Travers Preston was conscious of a singular pity for this frail relic of an older time and a desire to have known her, perhaps to have loved her, in her superlatively attractive youth, but he only said:

"I am afraid it is you who have mastered the gentle art of flattery, and would make one forget even the passage of years."

"No, no, Mr. Travers Preston," cried the old lady, with her mirthless, quavering laugh, which contained yet some notes of melody, like some ancient instrument. "No, no; time writes its traces too broad and deep for any agency of man to smooth them away. In your case, however, to have passed the three decades, is simply to have learned how to live."

"To have learned the lesson badly, as most of us do," Travers Preston said, laughing. "I fancy the greater part of mankind would begin over again if they could."

"Oh, yes," cried Cousin Wilhelmina, "every one would be young again, and if, being young, there could be experience. Experience, however, means finding out the sawdust filling of the doll we play with. Oh, sir, life is a cruel deception, and growing old, one has only to look forward to nothingness."

Even the man of the world, accustomed to hearing all sorts of opinions, was shocked at this blunt statement and scarcely knew what to say in answer. As he hesitated, Cousin Wilhelmina lightly changed the subject:

"See, there is poor little Miss Mary casting appealing glances this way. I am sure she

wants to exercise her benevolence upon you in some fashion."

Her actual tone regarding Miss Robinson was scarcely in keeping with that which she had previously used, when she urged him to penetrate into the other apartment. Once again he was puzzled.

"What a good, unselfish creature she is," Cousin Wilhelmina resumed, "and so vehement a partisan. One would scarcely believe, to look at her, what a wonderful capacity for devotion and extravagant admiration she possesses."

There was a tinge of bitterness in her words, which her companion could not understand. He remembered those things which Miss Mary had said of her relative in the course of various conversations, and he answered, readily enough:

"Yes, I have noticed she is quite a hero-worshiper."

"A heroine-worshiper would fit the case more exactly," Cousin Wilhelmina observed, drily, with a keen glance at the man beside her. "So far she has not, I believe, developed an abnormal admiration for any member of the other sex."

Travers Preston reddened, as he replied, hastily:

"I am sure you are quite right. That was altogether my meaning." And he wondered if the mistress of the mansion had once more mis-

understood him. He glanced over to where Mary stood. She was looking in his direction, and he plainly read in her face an invitation, almost an entreaty. It seemed evident that for one reason or another, she was anxious that he should follow her into the other room. He was about to obey her injunction, when the mistress of the mansion spoke again and he was compelled to give her his attention:

“We were speaking of the portrait. You must make her show it to you, but to-night would not be a very fitting opportunity. It is considered very life-like. Both the pictures, in fact, are equally good, though the work of different artists.”

“I shall look forward to seeing them,” declared Travers Preston.

“You must dine with us some evening, and then you shall examine them at your leisure,” Cousin Wilhelmina resumed. “But you must positively go away now. It is not fair for an old woman to monopolize so much of your society. Some of my young friends will find it very hard to forgive me.”

So dismissed, Travers Preston had no recourse but to obey and leave Cousin Wilhelmina. He looked over to the spot where Miss Mary had been standing, but the spectacled man had offered her his arm and led her away. He was,

therefore, left to wander about aimlessly, talking to one person or another, and observing all those objects which betokened the taste and fashion of a by-gone day. He passed the time thus, with more or less patience. It never occurred to him to penetrate into the inner apartment. Indeed, his interest was centered about that figure in the chair, misty in its shroudings of lace and chiffon.

His eyes returned again and again towards that center, and once he perceived, or fancied he perceived, that very image which had so often haunted his imagination. A form, slender, graceful and delicately poised, a face exquisitely beautiful, as revealed in one fleeting glance. The apparition remained but an instant, bending slightly towards the old lady's chair, and standing just between the bronze statues. Travers Preston started forward eagerly, but even as he gazed the vision faded into impalpable nothingness, and there were the metal statues and the elegant figure, and weary, disillusioned face of Cousin Wilhelmina.

The man of the world regained his composure instantly, with a quick, startled glance about him to see that his late melodramatic action had remained unnoticed. He was half alarmed, half indignant, at this trick which his fancy had played upon him. The whole thing was absurd.

He had permitted his mind to run upon a single subject to a ridiculous extent. He was moody and silent and disposed to be irritable upon the homeward way. It seemed monotonous doing precisely what he had done upon a previous occasion, in escorting his prosaic companion homewards. He hated the noise and bustle of the streets, and concluded that he must be in need of a change. New York, that evening, struck him as particularly stale, flat and unprofitable.

"You did not talk to her after all," Mary Robinson ventured, for she was somewhat awed by her companion's silence.

He looked round upon her impatiently as he inquired:

"Why, what are you thinking of, my dear Miss Mary?"

"I certainly did not see you speaking to her," Mary answered.

This seemed a most mendacious statement, but so impolite a suggestion could not be put bluntly into speech. Travers Preston observed, however, sarcastically:

"I am subject to flashes of eloquent silence. Possibly it was at one of those moments you observed me."

"But I did not see you anywhere near her," Mary persisted.

"And yet you have good sight?"

"The very best. It must have been while I was taking an ice in the supper room."

Travers Preston literally stared at his companion.

"You are quite too subtle for me," he observed, drily.

"No I am not subtle. I wish I were. She is."

"The subtlety of experience?"

Mary shook her head.

"No," she said, slowly, "it isn't that, but will you mind my saying that it is very odd you should be so interested in hearing of her and yet avoid her so persistently when you are at the house."

"You are talking paradoxes."

"No, I am saying what I mean."

"Well, what in heaven's name—forgive my bluntness—do you mean?"

"What I have said, that you avoid my cousin."

Travers Preston was fairly stupified by this astounding statement.

"And I have got it into my head," Mary went on, seriously, "that you are afraid of her."

Her companion started. The word afraid seemed somehow uncanny in connection with the late apparition, which he fancied he had seen:

"You are fanciful," he said, coldly. "Why should I be afraid of your cousin?"

"Why are men ever afraid of beauty and the power of fascination?"

"You are really too absurd, dear child, and that, I assure you, has never been one of my weaknesses. I have rather courted such dangers, as you seem to apprehend. Besides, think a little of what you are saying. If it were question of some delicate flower of girlhood, some enchanting ideal, magnetic and beautiful, with a beauty from within."

He spoke with unconscious warmth. He was describing, in so many words, that form and face which, for a moment, he had imagined standing beside the old lady's chair.

"Then you don't think her beautiful?" Mary inquired, disappointedly.

"That goes without saying. Beautiful with the beauty of winter."

"Well," sighed Mary, "she does not impress me in that way at all. But there is no use in arguing. No two people ever think alike on these subjects."

"We must agree to disagree, then, that is all, and I hope you will put up with me, Miss Mary. I fear I am growing old and crusty."

"You old?" cried Mary. "Oh, no."

"I am well past the three decades, and that is

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old enough to feel at times disgusted with things in general."

His look of utter weariness, of consummate boredom, struck even Mary's inexperience. It was the logical outcome of the life he had led, for the most part aimless and devoted to his own pleasure.

"This great, feverish Gotham," he said, "wears a man out, exhausts his vitality. I should like to fly off to those South Sea Islands, where Stevenson found such repose."

Miss Mary Appleby Robinson was out of her depths and frankly recognized the fact. She did not attempt to follow this man in his various moods. She admired him, afar off, as one admires some rare phenomenon, and she had a project in her mind concerning him. She responded in her simple-hearted fashion to the smile which, presently, lit up his plain features. As they arrived just then at Miss Mary's home, she held out her hand in farewell. Travers Preston seized it and shook it warmly.

"You must forgive the irritable moods of a man who has been seeing visions," he said, and with these enigmatical words he left her.

Chapter VI.

THE PORTRAIT TO THE RIGHT.

Mr. Travers Preston being a man of great common sense, and of a mental poise which gave him full control of his faculties, resolved after that Thursday evening to keep away from the house with the peacocks, and put the whole matter out of his mind. In pursuance of this resolve, he suffered his temporary intimacy with the Appleby Robinsons to languish, somewhat to their astonishment, as they had, of course, no clue to the enigma.

He had adhered stoically to this resolution for several weeks and he had serious thoughts of sailing away with some friends to spend a few months in Algiers, when he found one evening, upon his writing table, a dainty, perfumed note. It seemed to exhale something of that fragrance which emanates from a sandal wood casket. He took it up and scrutinized the writing, a delicate Italian hand. He knew by a species of instinct who was the writer of that note. Tear-

ing it open, he found it to be an invitation to dinner from Cousin Wilhelmina, with the proviso that he should, upon that occasion, have an opportunity of seeing certain family portraits in which he had expressed an interest.

Pondering over this invitation, he felt that, despite his late resolve, it could not well be declined. A refusal would appear excessively rude and discourteous. Moreover, he was conscious of a very strong desire to go.

"I shall see the portrait," he thought, "and that will be well worth while, before leaving New York. I might never have another opportunity. Cousin Wilhelmina may have vanished from the scene before I see Manhattan again."

So, sitting down, he wrote a very cordial note of acceptance. He proceeded thither in a handsome cab on the appointed evening and at the hour named, which was somewhat earlier than that at which fashionable New York dines. As he was removing his top coat in the hall, he heard the soft tones of Cousin Wilhelmina slightly raised into querulousness, conversing with some one in the drawing room. He could not avoid hearing the following fragments of the talk:

"I am very much disappointed and quite vexed with her."

"But there is the dance at Sherry's."

“The dance at Sherry’s! As if half the town will not be dining somewhere before going to the ball.”

“She had promised to dine with the Allisons and go on to the dance from there.”

“She should not have promised until she had consulted me and discovered my arrangements. I am exceedingly annoyed at her.”

Mr. Travers Preston did not pause longer. He gave his name to the servant, he fancied it was the same man who had assisted Cousin Wilhelmina up the steps, and caused himself to be announced, thus effectually putting an end to the dialogue. He had already surmised that the second speaker, who had assumed an apologetic tone for some one unknown, was Miss Mary Appleby Robinson. Her meagre form was encased in a pink frock, which was peculiarly becoming to her, and heightened a pretty little flush upon her cheek. She came forward to meet the first arrival diffidently, and with an air of deprecation, as if she owed him, too, an apology. No other guests had arrived as yet, though the half dozen invited appeared almost immediately after. Travers Preston wondered who it was that had failed to be present on account of the dance at Sherry’s.

He meant to look in there later himself. It was to be, according to the current phraseology,

a very smart affair. It was a *bal poudré*, and masques were to be worn until supper time. Some of the costumes, it is said, would be remarkably good. It would be worth the seeing, to drop in about supper time, just before the unmasking.

The dinner was very exclusive, but not particularly brilliant nor entertaining, and one of the guests, at least, who had upon his writing table half a dozen more amusing invitations for that evening, wished sincerely that it was over and that he might be free to go and have a look at the portraits. On re-entering the drawing room, he could not help glancing half apprehensively, half hopefully, at the space between the statuettes. There was nothing there save impalpable air, and his imagination was not sufficiently strong, just then, to supply him with an optical delusion.

In the course of the evening, Cousin Wilhelmina deputed Miss Mary to show the chief guest the portraits, apologizing for her own inability to mount the stairs, and expressing her dissatisfaction with some one who should have been there to perform this office, but who had gone instead to the dance at Sherry's. He followed his guide up the broad stair-case, his feet sinking in the thick piled carpet. This stair-case led to the floor above, where there were a

library, a music room, and what was called the morning room. Travers Preston remembered to have been in this latter apartment in Uncle Jerry's time, and had often seen him lounging there amongst books and papers. It was now converted into a very charming sitting room, and its furnishings, so dainty and harmonious, were evidently directed by feminine taste. The visitor wondered somewhat, but he asked no question. The portraits were hung at the end of the long, broad corridor, and as the two proceeded towards them, Miss Mary inquired of her companion if he intended going to the ball.

"I think so," he answered. "Are you?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I am far too insignificant a person to be asked to that dance, but you will be almost certain to see her there."

"Who?"

"Why, Cousin Wilhelmina, to be sure."

The astonished gentleman fairly gasped. He recalled the fragile, ethereal appearance of the old lady below, looking as if a very breath of air would blow her away, and assuring him that she scarcely ever mounted the stairs. Would any woman of her age, in her sane senses, ever dream of going to a ball?

"She is going in character, too," Miss Mary confided to him.

"What character, for heaven's sake?" he exclaimed, breathlessly.

"I shall not tell you," Mary answered. "And if you should meet her there, please don't say that I told you she was going."

"I shall not mention it to her," Travers Preston promised. "But do you think it is quite prudent for her to go?"

"Prudent?" inquired Mary, resentfully. "Why, what can you possibly mean? She is going there with friends, and the dance is amongst intimates."

"Oh, I didn't mean that, of course. I was thinking of her health."

"Health? Why, she is always well. I have never heard her complain."

"That is fortunate, certainly. She is a wonder."

"She is wonderful in many ways, yes," assented Mary. "But I see you don't approve very much of these fancy dress balls. You don't appear to think it is quite correct to go there."

Travers Preston smiled at her simplicity.

"Correct?" he cried. "Why, my dear little girl, even if there were question of such a thing in a private ball organized amongst friends, your Cousin Wilhelmina could not possibly be guilty of any impropriety."

"That's what she thinks herself, and she is awfully particular, the very pink of propriety."

"It has become a habit by this time, I am quite sure."

Mary looked at him doubtfully. She thought he was always saying such odd things. In fact, she began to consider him quite erratic.

"She does not very often go to balls," she observed. "She doesn't care for them."

"The dear, old creature has probably grown tired of them."

Again Mary gave her companion a hasty glance to make sure that she had heard aright. He was looking gravely ahead of him towards the portraits. When the two reached that spot, Mary switched on the light, and silently observed the effect, as the gaze of the critical man of the world passed keenly from one counterfeit presentment to the other. At first sight they seemed to represent one and the same person, a young, slender girl, clad in a flame-colored gown. Her neck, snow white and swan-like in its proportions, was encircled by a necklace of blood-red rubies. From them, as a flower, bloomed forth the delicate contour of the face. But there the resemblance ended, and Travers Preston was quick to perceive the difference.

The portrait upon the left showed a fine face, rarely beautiful, indeed, and marked by elegance and repose, but cold, proud, imperious. The face of one to whom the world and its proud

pomps and vanities were all in all. He turned to the portrait on the right and his heart seemed to go straight out from him. The artist here had outdone himself. He had reproduced a face, less beautiful, less icily perfect, but full of fire and tenderness, a mobile, expressive countenance, capable of interpreting a hundred varying moods. The very irregularities of feature seemed to accentuate a sadness, a pathos, which touched the observer to the core of his being. There was a singular nobility, too, in the poise of the head and neck.

"She is beautiful, is she not?" Mary asked.

"Beauty is not the word," Travers Preston exclaimed, in a low voice. "It is charm, magnetism, attraction. And only to think that it has existed and passed away forever, with its youth."

He felt a poignant pang at the thought, and it was borne in upon him with a sensation akin to desolation, that if he had but lived a half century sooner, he might have been amongst the throng that pressed round this beautiful creature, and that he might have won her by the very force of will which he would have put into the contest. At that moment his life seemed to him worthless, what remained of his youth and manhood a mere mockery,

"That portrait—" Mary began.

"Oh, the other is not worth considering at all, except as an exquisite study," interrupted Travers Preston. "The artist has simply maligned his model. He has painted her with the soul omitted."

Mary eyed him curiously as he spoke. A new idea had suddenly flashed into her mind. She acted her part of guide, however, without further remark, pointing with outstretched hand to the canvas.

"I was going to say," she resumed, "that this second portrait had a history, quite an interesting one, which I shall tell you some time."

"It is very perfect, artistically," Travers Preston commented, speaking in the same breathless tone, as though he were treading some holy ground. "There is genius in every line of the canvas."

The wonder and admiration upon the gazer's face gave place to something deeper, more tender and more human, the dawning of a new light, the revealing of some glorious secret.

"Miss Mary," cried Travers Preston, suddenly turning to his companion, "I would have given all the years of my life to have known her as she was there."

Miss Mary looked at him with full comprehension. She knew now that her surmise had been correct. He believed the two pictures to

represent one and the same person, but while the first had left him unmoved, the second had inspired him with a sentiment very closely akin to love. It seemed an absurdity, and yet it was that emotion and no other, which Mary's clear sight read in the young man's face. From that moment she took to heart more than ever a certain project, which previously had occurred to her mind. She waited patiently, however, while Mr. Travers Preston remained as if entranced, still gazing with the same half-startled intentness at the portrait. At last she spoke, with her hand upon the switch to turn out the light:

"I suppose we may go now."

"Nay, not these twenty years," cried Travers Preston, quoting, half jest, whole earnest, the enamored Leontes. Yet after he had looked a few moments longer, he turned away of his own accord, suppressing a sigh. Mary, who had watched him with a curious, placid patience, turned off the light, and together the two descended the broad staircase. This man, who in ordinary society was regarded as a lover of the day that was present, too wise, perhaps, to be a cynic, but at least cynically indifferent to feminine attractions, was completely uplifted, carried out of himself, by this counterfeit presentment of girlish beauty. Mary heard him mutter to himself, as he followed her down stairs:

"Stars ! Stars ! And all eyes else dead coals !"

The girl, who was so very demure, but who usually surprised her acquaintances by knowing a great deal more than they expected, replied rather to his thought than to the words uttered, making use, in her turn, of a quotation:

"What if this statue could come to life ?"

Travers Preston glanced at her a moment, sharply, then he exclaimed, lightly:

"My dear child, we are talking nonsense. This is the twentieth century and I am due even now at Sherry's. I must make my adieux to your wonderful cousin, and tear myself away."

It was not without emotion that he bowed once more over the fragile hand extended to him in farewell.

"I have seen the portrait," he said. "And you will allow me to say that its beauty has made still another conquest."

BOOK TWO.

Chapter VII.

THE DANCE AT SHERRY'S.

It was late when Travers Preston entered that brilliantly lighted room, never more brilliant than upon that occasion, with its throng of picturesque figures, their costumes mostly of a by-gone time, weirdly out of keeping with the glare of modernity which pervaded the atmosphere. The dancing was at its height, but the late comer, not being in costume, did not, of course, join in the giddy mazes. He allowed his uninterested gaze to wander over the assemblage, as he strolled about aimlessly, exchanging a few words with groups of men, who stood around the walls, or engaging in brief conversation with some of the older women.

His mind was still fully occupied by the remembrance of the portrait, and of that beauty, who so far eclipsed all these living and breathing beauties, presently to be disclosed by the removal of the masks. He was oppressed by a profound sadness, a sense of weariness and of the futility of everything, since age must triumph over the rarest perfections. As he passed through

one of the ante-rooms, his attention was arrested by a group of five or six men gathered about some central figure. Something in the eagerness of their attitudes struck him, and he was conscious of a languid curiosity, to discover who was the peerless lady that could so attract this gathering of blasé youths. He strolled forward and suddenly, as if he had received a blow, he was brought to a stand still, with white face and tense nerves. There, in the full glow of innumerable lights was a figure, slender and graceful, clad in a gown of flame-colored satin. The throat, white and swan-like, was encircled by a necklace of blood-red rubies, which caught and mirrored in their fiery depths, the radiance of the electricity. The face was covered by a small mask, and the voice, clear and vibrant, yet soft and low, was such as might have fittingly issued from the parted lips of the portrait. Even under the severest strain of emotion, people in general, through force of habit, are perfectly conventional in their actions. It is true that Travers Preston, beholding thus the image which had haunted his thoughts, felt a sudden, mad desire, whereat he would have been the first to laugh in his normal moments, to scatter these "puppies," who were monopolizing the attention of the lady, and face to face with her, to demand or implore the solution of the mystery that tormented him.

What he did do, however, was to saunter in his usual nonchalant fashion, towards a veteran beau, the hero of many a social skirmish, who stood leaning wearily against the wall. He inquired from him, with a view to obtaining still further information, what character was personated by the lady of the flame-colored satin and the rubies.

The veteran, a species of McAllister, and acquainted with every jot and tittle of the gossip in Gotham's innermost circle, laughed and affected to treat the question as a joke. "Why, my dear fellow, you're not serious. There's no attempt at mystery in that disguise. Everybody knows that it is a case of resurrection. A by-gone beauty trotted out to make a sensation amongst the youngsters."

The tone of this explanation jarred upon the questioner and its substance left him more mystified than ever. The old beau had a shrewd suspicion that Travers Preston might be quizzing him, taking it for granted that he of all men must know what was going on, and be in touch with every movement, in the world of fashion.

"Why, I expected," he said, "to see you pairing off with her an hour ago. It would be quite in your line. If I were only twenty years younger, I shouldn't need any prompting to scatter those boys to the four winds."

The old fellow shuffled off and Travers Preston, watching him, thought with a sinking heart that he was the type and illustration of wasted energies, of a life frittered away in ball-rooms, an intelligence exhausting itself in the gossip of the club-rooms. His own faculties were at that moment benumbed, though a subtle madness seemed working in the brain of this man, who was ordinarily the sanest and shrewdest amongst his fellows. He heard that voice, so strangely sweet, giving the imperious command:

“Go away, all of you now, and dance. It is uncivil not to do your duty. I am going to stay here a few moments and rest, and I want to be quite alone.”

The young men obeyed her, as if they had been so many automatons, and the lady was left, as she had desired, alone, save for the presence, which she did not seem to remark, of Mr. Travers Preston. She sank down into the corner of a sofa, her flame-colored gown sweeping over the floor and the rubies scintillating and glowing, like tiny lakes of fire. For an instant there was silence, broken only by the sounds from the adjoining ball-room, the gliding feet over the polished floor, the murmur of voices and the strains of the orchestra. To the man, as he stood there, trembling, uncertain, palpitating with a great eagerness, the music sounded

spectral. It seemed to throb and beat with an almost human pulsation and to voice those unspoken doubts and fears and longings, which were rising within him.

By a sudden impulse, Travers Preston crossed the brief space between them and stood before the motionless figure on the sofa; when he spoke, his voice sounded husky and unnatural, from the stress of his emotion :

“I beg of you,” he cried, “to let me see your face for a single instant.”

The lady turned and, startled by his earnestness, gazed at him, through the apertures in the mask, that permitted him no clue to the eyes concealed within. Then, the figure slowly arose with that air of complete repose, so rarely attained, so absolutely high bred and charming.

“The hour for unmasking is the supper-time,” she answered, “your request is most unusual.”

“Everything connected with the affair is unusual, and that is why I venture to insist ——”

The head upon the beautiful neck was raised an inch or two, so that the curves of the chin were displayed below the mask. Travers Preston bowed low:

“I should rather say, I implore you to grant my request. It is of the most vital importance to me.”

"You must be aware, sir, that this is a most singular proceeding," said the lady, gravely, "and surely you should be able at least to give a reason for your request."

"I have no plea to offer. I merely want to convince myself that I am neither mad nor dreaming."

The words and the powerful emotion that was evident in the man's whole manner, seemed to touch the listener. After a moment's hesitation, she slowly raised her mask and showed the same face identically, which had fascinated Travers Preston an hour earlier, before the portrait.

"The past come to life!" he murmured, with lips that had suddenly grown parched and dry, and with a sensation of something like terror clutching at his heart.

"Tell me," he cried, "for God's sake, tell me who you are!"

The eyes that regarded him grew startled in their turn and the smile that hovered about the lips was clearly forced.

"Spirit or woman," cried Travers Preston, transported out of himself, "your image in one form or another has haunted me for weeks past, and from the moment that I stood before your portrait, I felt as if I must have always known and loved you."

The lady, she was only a girl but little beyond her teens, drew back with a quick movement of alarm or indignation, while Travers Preston, unheeding, continued:

"When I stood before that painting, I would have given all the years of my life, for the power to go backwards half a century and prostrate myself before the glory of your youth."

A flush rose to the girl's delicate cheek and her eyes brightened till they fairly dazzled the infatuated onlooker, who had forgotten everything but the wonder and delight of finding her still young and, to all appearance, human like himself.

"I would remind you, sir," the girl said, in a voice that was low and sweet, despite its icy coldness, "that there are limits to my patience. If any license is permitted at a masquerade, you have far exceeded its boundaries."

Travers Preston stepped back as if he had received a blow and passed his hand two or three times across his forehead.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured, "I must surely have been dreaming, and I fear I have deeply offended you."

She passed him by without a word, and advancing to the ball-room door, beckoned to a fair-haired youth, who all too eagerly advanced and offered his arm. The lady must have been charitable indeed, if some harsher explanation of

the man's extraordinary conduct than that which he had himself offered, did not occur to her mind, and so Travers Preston was the first to admit to himself. What would she think of him? How could he ever repair the seeming insult he had offered, to her of all people? He had dared to address her in the impassioned language of an ardent suitor, before he had been formally introduced, and while she was yet in total ignorance of his identity. He did not wait for supper. He would not risk the chance of seeing her again.

Rushing to the cloak-room, he seized his coat and hat and made a hasty exit from the building. With a sense of intense relief, he found himself out in the cool air of night, in the comparative silence of Fifth Avenue. He hastened downwards toward his lodgings, with the strains of the music and the melody of that voice of incomparable sweetness blending in his ears. He looked up to the stars, shining so calmly in the vaults above. Their serenity seemed the antithesis of the unrest which possessed him. Gazing into their still depths, he was conscious of a deep joyfulness, underlying the pain and mortification of his late outburst of folly.

She, the original of the portrait, really lived. She was no myth. He should not have to go back fifty years to prostrate himself metaphorically at her feet. He knew she was angry with

him, or at least, with the unknown man, who had so grievously offended her. But what man despairs of obtaining the forgiveness of a woman who was gentle and generous, as her face betokened, especially when he has upon his lips, that old argument of the perfidious King, "it was thine eyes, sweet maid, which urged me to the folly"?

Chapter VIII.

MR. TRAVERS PRESTON RECEIVES A PARCEL.

When Mr. Travers Preston had time to think the matter over, in the light of every day common sense, he was still more aghast at what had occurred. That he, a gentleman of the strictest, conventional propriety, should thus have transgressed every code, seemed incredible. To have addressed a lady, utterly unknown to him, and in the language of the most impassioned devotion, was a course of action which would certainly admit of a very harsh construction. If the story got about, which he very much feared it would, any explanation that he could give would only make matters worse. The actual truth would be received with shouts of derision, and the more so that the flame colored satin and the rubies might, after all, be a mere coincidence, a more or less faithful imitation of Cousin Wilhelmina's portrait.

Travers Preston, indeed, felt strongly tempted to take the next steamer for that trip abroad, which he had been contemplating. A variety of

conflicting emotions, however, restrained him. In the first place, there was the fear that it would intensify the ridiculous aspect of the case, if it were bruited about that he had so grievously misbehaved, and had fled to avoid whatever consequences might arise from his action. In the second place, he had a consciousness that it was neither honorable nor manly to refuse to accept a situation, which he had himself created. He owed the lady, whoever she might be, an apology. It was likewise due to himself, that he should convince her, difficult as it appeared, that he had acted in perfectly good faith.

There was something, too, in this last suggestion, more powerful yet than either of the others. It quickened his pulses and exhilarated his languid spirit. It was like entering upon a gladiatorial combat. The formidable obstacles, which hedged round his purpose of finding the lady and making in person that explanation which she had a right to demand, only increased his desire to accomplish that result.

Stronger than all these other motives which urged him to remain just then in New York, was one that, since the world began, has been a leading incentive to actions, good or bad. Incredible as it might seem in a man of his generation and surroundings, his way of life and his turn of thought, he was genuinely in love. It ap-

peared as if, with fine irony, the tender passion had made him its victim, in the most unexpected and almost absurd fashion. Those dreams and visions, so to say, that mysterious attraction towards the house with the peacocks, had, in a curiously prophetic manner, prepared him for what was coming.

His artistic soul had caught fire, in that brief instant when he stood before the portrait, and the spark thus enkindled had warmed into life and vitality, when he found himself in the presence of that living personality and looked, or so he could have sworn, into the self-same face. The statue had, as it were, come to life, the star-like eyes had looked into his, though it were with scorn and resentment, and the lovely lips had spoken.

It seemed a nemesis, since in his lightly, cynical fashion, Travers Preston had been accustomed to mock at the tender passion, or to philosophize as to the improbability of its existence in the utilitarian day and generation, which surrounded him as an atmosphere. He was prepared to admit that this primal power had accomplished great things in the past, that the fiery soul of many a poet had found its expression in that vitalizing force, that sculptors had carved it into their marbles, painters had, through it, immortalized their canvasses, soldiers

had advanced to forlorn hopes under its influence, and statesmen had interwoven it with the destinies of nations. Love, he used to say, was the immortal pastime of the immortals. It was the parent of superb tragedy, or of exquisite comedy. It was all very well under Aeolian skies, upon Thessalian hill sides or in the Attic atmosphere. But in the every day rushing world of the twentieth century, on the thoroughfares, or even in the drawing rooms of bustling New York, it was essentially out of place.

Now that this ambrosial nectar of the gods was at his lips, and he felt the vivifying flame transfiguring him, it mattered very little whether the sun shone down upon the pastoral softness of the Grecian isles or upon the grim realities of the commercial metropolis.

He felt that there, in this busy center of modern progress, a man might be conscious of that same glow at the heart and that same intense devotion to one object. Human nature was substantially the same, and the song that sprang to the lips of Theocritus, might make itself heard in the heart of the shrewdest financier amid the rush and roar of Wall street.

For all his worldly knowledge, and that social tact upon which he had so long prided himself, Travers Preston was completely nonplused, as to how he should next proceed. He could not very

well broach the subject to Miss Mary Appleby Robinson, nor was it at all likely that she would in any case be able to solve the mystery. The idea of Cousin Wilhelmina occurred to him only to be dismissed again. Whoever the personage might be, of whom she was the unconscious prototype, it would never do to question her upon the subject. The true facts of the case, if disclosed to her, would probably elicit her delicate and refined, but no less pointed, raillery. That ridicule, he felt, would be insupportable. Travers Preston was convinced that there was only one person with whom he could safely introduce the topic, and that was the girl who, with the costume, had assumed the very features, the figure and the personality of the by-gone beauty.

Each time that he recalled the incidents of that evening, he found himself the more deeply penetrated with the individuality of the unknown being, revealed to him for a brief instant, and whom he believed to be the original of the portrait. Never had any face so haunted him, never had any voice so deeply stirred him as that which issued from those lovely lips. He would have given everything he possessed to be aware of the girl's identity and to be enabled to see her once more, face to face, and to converse with her.

Meantime, he had an uncomfortable suspicion that the people whom he met might be talking about the affair. At his club, during the next few days, he sat solitary. Whilst at his meals, he erected the rampart of a newspaper, as the defense of his solitude, but from behind this bulwark, he cast inquiring glances in various directions. A few men hailed him, passing the table where he sat, but there was nothing unusual in their demeanor. The faces about the room, which had become familiar from daily use and wont, did not give the faintest token that reports of any sort had got into circulation about him. Occasionally scraps of conversation were wafted to him from afar, but were such as would be naturally uppermost in those surroundings. In any event, the name of a lady would scarcely be introduced into the profane atmosphere of clubdom.

It became his daily habit to visit that dwelling which had become invested with a hundred-fold attraction. The warm, living interest with which he now regarded it, was as sunshine unto moonshine, compared with the dreamy, abstracted feeling that had formerly possessed him. He felt impelled to examine every corner of the building, in the vague hope that he might see her.

Still rejoicing in the knowledge that she really existed, he wondered over and over if she could by any chance form a part of that household, or

if she were even an occasional visitor thereto. One or the other of these conjectures he told himself must be correct, since she had so exactly copied the costume of the portrait.

One fine afternoon, as he stood looking at the peacocks wandering about in the sunshine, he was moved by a sudden impulse to enter the house and throw himself upon the mercy of Cousin Wilhelmina, making a full confession of the folly whereof he had been guilty, and imploring her good offices. He would ask her to tell him frankly who it was that had worn the celebrated costume, and so closely resembled the portrait.

His intention was anticipated by the sudden opening of a door and the appearance upon the scene of Cousin Wilhelmina herself, leaning upon the footman's arm. At the same instant, there was the sound of wheels, the peacocks fled with their shrill screaming and the carriage emerged from the stable yard. By the time the old lady had reached the foot of the steps, Travers Preston was at her side, greeting her with traces of embarrassment. He was afraid she might have heard of his ridiculous conduct at the ball, which now recurred to him in its full enormity, under the gaze of those piercing eyes.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Travers Preston," cried the tremulous, quavering voice, "or should

I say afternoon? A very lovely one, too, is it not?"

"Very lovely, indeed," cried the young man, helping to assist Cousin Wilhelmina into the carriage. When she was seated there and the tall footman stood aside for further orders, the old lady observed:

"You went to the dance at Sherry's the other evening, and I am informed that you lost something there."

"Was it my heart or my head?" inquired Travers Preston, flushing to the very roots of his hair.

"How should I know, sir, of such losses as those," retorted Cousin Wilhelmina, with her musical laugh. There seemed something weird and uncanny in the brightness of her glance and the smile which had once been so powerful an attraction, and both contained a suggestion of that other personality, so much so, indeed, that the young man asked himself if it could be possible, that age should ever simulate youth and by means of artificial devices produce an optical delusion. The mere suggestion caused a sinking of the heart, which all too clearly indicated that he had passed from merely artistic and æsthetic emotions, to far deeper and more real sensations. The doubt lasted but for a moment. He had only to recall that glance, the warm, living grace

of form and countenance to reject that idea once and forever. The old lady presently broke silence in her ordinary tones, though there was that in her face which suggested that she had heard something of the affair and was curious to hear more.

"I am referring," she answered, "to something very trivial and commonplace. But just wait a moment."

She summoned the footman by a sign and dispatched him on an errand. Then, she said, quietly, with her smiling glance fixed upon the young man's face:

"So you enjoyed the bal poudré at Sherry's?"

"Enjoyed is scarcely the word," Travers Preston replied, in a low tone, "it was a very memorable occasion for me."

"Ah!" ejaculated the listener, asking, presently, in her ordinary gracious fashion, "Did any of the contumes strike you as remarkable?"

"Only one!"

"Is it permissible to inquire which?"

"It was a gown of flame colored satin, finished by a necklace of rubies, one, in short, which should be very familiar to you."

"Did it strike you as at all outré or bizarre?"

"You know, I had seen and admired it before in the portrait."

"True, it was worn many years ago, as you have heard, at a ball."

"When the wearer made it famous."

Cousin Wilhelmina responded to the compliment and the bow which accompanied it, with a smile, which was both weary and melancholy.

"You are a sad flatterer, sir," she replied, "but here is Thomas, with the parcel, which is addressed to you."

The footman hurried down the steps and Cousin Wilhelmina, taking the parcel, motioned to him that he might mount the box. She then gave a very small object, tied up neatly in brown paper, to Mr. Travers Preston, explaining:

"It was picked up in the ball room by—by some one whom you met there."

"By her!" cried the young man, bending forward, with a light of eagerness upon his face.

"My wits are not as keenly sharpened as they once were," Cousin Wilhelmina observed drily, "and you must forgive an old woman's dullness, if I do not immediately apply the pronoun."

Travers Preston drew back, abashed. He seemed destined to place himself in ridiculous positions.

"The stupidity is all upon my side," he cried hastily. "How could you possibly guess my meaning? Thanks so much for the parcel. I

shall not keep you longer from your drive."

"It is an ideal afternoon for a drive," the old lady answered, "but I am charmed to have had this little chat with you. Do look in upon us very soon."

"I have promised myself that pleasure," Travers Preston said, so formally, that he could scarcely help laughing himself, as he raised his hat and saw the carriage driving away in the stream of sunshine, which followed it like a benediction. Then he opened the package, it contained a handkerchief, with his monogram in the corner, and which he must have dropped, probably in the agitation and embarrassment of that brief moment in the ante-room. He thrust the square of cambric into his pocket, with the reflection borne in upon him poignantly, that he had been recognized and his identity established by the lady of the flame colored gown. For she it must have been who had picked up the handkerchief. This did not so much matter, as he afterwards convinced himself, since he was only anxious to meet her face to face and make every possible explanation.

If only she did not confide her impressions of him to any of her partners. His cheeks burned with mortification at the thought. As to the handkerchief, it was, at least, a link between him and her. A sudden idea occurred to him and he

glanced at the paper, wherein the handkerchief had been inclosed, and which he still held in his hand. His address was written thereupon, in a clear and legible hand, which was not the delicate, Italian caligraphy of Cousin Wilhelmina. It was a writing, full of character and individuality, and it sent Travers Preston's thoughts into a delicious whirl. For he felt that he at last possessed something tangible, which, by every probability, belonged to her. It was his own name written by herself. He folded it carefully and put it away, in the innermost recesses of one of those waistcoat pockets, which are an inestimable boon to the sex masculine, for the preservation of hidden treasures.

It is certain that old romancers are correct in declaring that love clutches at straws and is entranced by shadows. Here was this man, in many respects a complete product of the twentieth century, stowing away, with sensations akin to delight, a scrap of writing, which was, in sober truth, a reminder of a very foolish incident, wherein he had been chief actor. One thing was clear to the young man's mind, and it afforded him intense satisfaction, that the heroine of that little drama had more than an accidental connection with the house of the peacocks. Whoever or whatever she might be, she was in communication with Cousin Wilhelmina.

Therefore, sooner or later, he would be sure to discover her identity, and be enabled to make such plea for himself as circumstances might suggest. It occurred to him, as he still stood reflecting, to wonder if by any chance, that incomparable lady of his thoughts could be a dweller in that mysterious mansion, and might be, at that very moment, looking down at him from one of those plate-glass windows. With this thought in his mind, he withdrew somewhat hastily to a point of vantage, whence he took a careful survey of the entire front of the house. He hoped against hope that should his surmise prove correct, he might catch one faint glimpse of the face, which was so strongly impressed upon his memory.

Coldly and blankly the plate glass windows gazed down upon him, the sun was just then withdrawn so that its radiance no longer relieved their opaque dullness, and no vestige of a human countenance was anywhere apparent. Travers Preston argued, as he stood, that it was impossible, after all, that the girl could be a resident of the house with the peacocks. Assuredly he must have seen her at the Thursday evening receptions, or upon that occasion when he dined there. Possibly she was some relative of Cousin Wilhelmina, and might have her domicile in any other part of the city. Having arrived at

this conclusion, he was the less reluctant to leave the spot, for he was at that stage of the tender passion when he would have gladly lingered on the mere chance of catching a glimpse of the beloved object. As the days passed, no matter what his occupation might be, he found himself possessed by the remembrance of that dual personality, and still more by the fascinating glimpse he had had of that belle of the ball room, who had fixed her lovely eyes upon him with indignant wonder. Sometimes his thoughts strayed to Miss Mary Appleby Robinson, and he wondered if that demure little personage could be amusing herself at his expense, and trying in some fashion or another to perplex him by her enthusiastic praises of her cousin. Assuredly they seemed to be playing at cross-purposes. When he was thinking of one thing she was perpetually talking upon another, and harping upon the same string to a wearisome degree. So far she had been but little helpful in his investigations.

Chapter IX.

CROSS PURPOSES.

Save for that brief interlude during which Mr. Travers Preston had deliberately avoided all intimacy with the Robinsons, Mary had enjoyed so much of that accomplished gentleman's society, as might have been seriously prejudicial to her peace of mind, but for the saving fact of a prior attachment. There was a tacit understanding between her and a grave and spectacled young Professor, who was almost always to be found at the Thursday evenings.

Nevertheless, she both liked and admired the old friend of the family, and perceived in him, with surprising intuition, an artistic soul, a tendency towards the ideal, and an unusual capacity for devotion. She had also made another discovery about Mr. Travers Preston, which had come to her spontaneously and instantaneously, and strongly appealed to her latent sense of humor.

On the occasion of their first meeting after the ball, Mary inquired, demurely:

"Did you see Cousin Wilhelmina at the dance?"

"I most certainly did not!" Travers Preston answered, irritably.

"I fancied that you could scarcely fail to remark her."

"Scarcely," responded the young man, thinking of the silvery hair, and fragile, shrunken figure.

"She is very noticeable."

"She would be particularly so at a ball."

"Now, you are laughing."

"No, I am quite serious."

"Laughing inwardly, I mean. But I assure you that there were few more striking figures there than my cousin."

"I have already agreed with you upon that point," Travers Preston answered.

"It would, you see," continued Mary, "remind so many older people of their youth, and so many younger people of the tales they had heard from their grandmothers."

"Young people, now-a-days, give little heed to the tales of their grandmothers."

"They like to hear of past beauties and past conquests, especially if they be of our sex."

"We men are more actual. We prefer present beauties."

“What a wonderful thing it would be,” cried Mary, “if they could unite both, the glamor of the past, the freshness of the present.”

“You are talking paradoxes, which seems to be a favorite amusement of yours, Miss Mary. Such a union would be irresistible, of course, but unfortunately impossible.”

“Then,” resumed Mary, waiving that point, “there was no one at Sherry’s who did attract your attention?”

“I decline to answer such leading questions.”

“Is it a leading question? Well, all I can say is, that I think your answer would have been different if you had seen her.”

“You are an inveterate hero-worshiper,” laughed Travers Preston. “I wonder what lucky individual of my sex will turn that habit of mind in his own direction.”

“I wonder,” Mary repeated, with great simplicity, which induced the reflection on the young man’s part that, despite her plainness, she was quite an attractive little personage herself.

“I think you and I possess that quality in common,” Mary said, quietly.

Travers Preston was startled:

“May I ask,” he inquired, “when you reached that conclusion?”

"On the night of the dance."

"Then you heard something?" cried Travers Preston.

"Only a phrase or two."

"From whom?"

"From yourself."

"From myself?" the young man exclaimed, half relieved, half disappointed. "When was that?"

"When I turned on the electric light before the portraits.

"Oh, is that what you mean?" Travers Preston responded, adding, after a pause, "Well, I did feel as if you had introduced me to the light beyond. That, however, was the artistic side of my nature and might argue nothing."

He was thinking, as he spoke, of that other moment, unknown to Mary, when he had met, as he believed, the original of the portrait.

"It argues ideality," said Mary, employing an expression which was a favorite with the Professor.

"What a big word for such a little person," laughed the young man. "I shall confess to anything if you continue to hurl such epithets at me."

"Yet you will not confess to having seen and admired Wilhelmina at the dance?"

Travers Preston made a gesture of despair.

"If you will not take my word for it," he said, "what more can I do?"

"So you did not lose your heart?" Mary persisted.

"I am not so sure of that," Travers Preston answered, jestingly. "And very often it is so little use. We are not all professors."

It was Mary's turn to look disconcerted, and after the sudden pause which followed, wherein the young man's eyes studied the girl's down-cast countenance, Travers Preston inquired:

"Returning to the subject of the portrait, Miss Mary, who has possession of the satin gown and the rubies?"

"Why, Cousin Wilhelmina, of course."

"But she does not wear them?"

"She does, and looks very lovely."

The young man turned away with some impatience. Was she playing on his credulity, or what jugglery with words was she practising? What he wanted to discover was, who had worn the famous costume. Certainly, and most certainly, that figure, slender and graceful, and that face, into which the vivid scarlet had rushed, had nothing to do with age or its sad decrepitude.

Yet that form and that lovely countenance had been, unless he were mad or dreaming,

identical with those of the portrait, and possibly with that vision of a moment which had appeared on one occasion behind Cousin Wilhelmina's chair. He did not, however, pursue his inquiries, though it seemed almost certain to him that some mysterious connection existed between the beautiful girl whom he had seen at Sherry's, and the aged woman in the chair, who had been, as he supposed, the original of both portraits. His mind was in a maze of bewildered conjecture, but he registered a mental vow to discover in some fashion or another, the solution of the mystery. If he could have made up his mind to confess the whole truth to Miss Mary, no doubt she would have materially assisted the investigation, but as it was, she merely added to his perplexity by her brief and disjointed remarks.

Chapter X.

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE.

From that time forth the man of fashion, who was in request everywhere, attended the Thursday evening receptions as sedulously as if he had not another place to go. On one of these occasions, he asked Miss Mary to do him a favor and let him have another look at the portrait.

"You speak in the singular number," Mary said. "Which do you want to see, the first or the second portrait?"

"The second, of course!" Travers Preston answered. "No one I think could possibly prefer the first. You, with your inexorable common sense, mustn't laugh at me, but—I have fallen in love with that picture. It makes me feel that, but for the score or more years of difference, I should most certainly have fallen at that woman's feet."

"I should like to see you at some one's feet."

"Should you?"

"Yes, I am sure you would make an exceptionally interesting lover."

"If you were only heart whole, Miss Mary," said the young man, echoing the girl's merry laugh, "that would be a quite sufficient challenge."

"Are you quite sure that *you* are heart whole?" retorted Miss Mary.

"Little witch! well, it doesn't matter. I have just confessed."

"Confessed as regards the portrait, but I should prefer to see you prostrate before some one of genuine flesh and blood, some one very different from me, some one of whom I am thinking."

"You are a living enigma, Miss Mary," said Travers Preston, "a veritable dealer in mysteries."

He followed her up the stairs and she switched on the light, saying as she did so:

"I am going to leave you a little while to your rhapsodies. I shall come back for you, though, in case you should remain rooted to the spot."

After she had gone, the young man remained, indeed, in admiration before the second portrait, and turning away impatiently from the first. He studied every detail of the costume,

every line and feature of the face, comparing it with that which was so vividly engraved upon his memory. While he was thus engaged, the light was suddenly extinguished, and almost immediately after, he heard a voice, that same voice, which had penetrated to the very depths of his soul, in the ante-room at Sherry's. The same clear, vibrant tones, inexpressibly sweet, sounded in his ears.

"What mischief are you at now?"

At the same moment, a delicate, slender hand was laid upon his arm. He did not shake it off, nor move aside. He simply stood petrified. Something like terror seized him, as again, he heard that voice:

"Why don't you speak—and what is this you have got on? The slender fingers ran over the coat sleeve with sudden, tremulous anxiety. Then came the question, hasty and agitated:

"Who are you?"

For a moment, Travers Preston could not answer. He felt his knees trembling under him, and he could scarcely trust himself to speak:

"I am a very unlucky individual," he declared, at last.

"Who are you?" repeated the voice, sharpened this time by anxiety, while the hand was hastily withdrawn from the sleeve.

"I am afraid I have frightened you," Travers Preston hastened to add, "but there is no cause for alarm. Pray believe that this intrusion——"

"Intrusion? What does it mean?"

Even in the confusion of the moment, Travers Preston admired the courage and self-control which enabled this young creature to speak calmly, instead of screaming or making an outcry of any sort.

"If you are who I believe," he said, "I seem destined to force myself upon you in the most untoward fashion. But you must believe that this contretemps was none of my seeking."

"You will oblige me to call for help, if you do not at once explain," declared the voice.

"Let me, at least, switch on the light, which has been turned off by some mistake," Travers Preston cried. He was, in fact, devoured by a burning curiosity to see the face and figure which he was convinced were identical with those that had so haunted him.

"This may be the opportunity I have sought," he continued, "to make an humble apology. Ever since that evening at Sherry's——" as he said these words, he heard the soft frou-frou of feminine garments. He reached forward to turn on the switch. Miss Mary stood in the very spot where he could have sworn that some

one else had been standing an instant before. She was regarding him with a smile, in which there was a touch of mockery.

"Surely you have not been masquerading," the young man cried, half angrily.

"Surely I have not been dreaming," Mary responded, "and yet I was almost certain that I heard you in conversation with some one."

"I was in conversation with some one," Travers Preston retorted.

"It must have been with Cousin Wilhelmina, then; she goes gliding about the house sometimes, and probably mistook you for a burglar."

"A very mild one."

"It is too early in the evening to be otherwise than mild."

"But your Cousin Wilhelmina could scarcely move away so swiftly."

"She can move as swiftly as an antelope."

"She is certainly a most wonderful old lady. She told me she could hardly get upstairs."

Mary laughed softly.

"You are perfectly sure it was your cousin?"

"Perfectly, for who else could be here?"

"I believe this house is bewitched."

"Are you so sure it is the house!"

"Or myself. But by whom?"

“By the arch-enchantress, Cousin Wilhelmina.”

Travers Preston turned away with an impatient gesture. He almost wished he had never heard the name. He repented sincerely that he had not succeeded in turning on the switch while that singular interview was in progress. Then, at least, he would have been acting on a certainty. He went away that evening more puzzled than ever, but also, if it were possible, more deeply in love, because of those few words which had been spoken in that sweetest of voices.

He did not in the least believe that it was an aged woman who had addressed him in that imperious tone of command, and who had shown such courage in presence of a supposed burglar. He felt assured that there was some mystery which he had not yet penetrated, and for the first time he wondered if Miss Mary could be the party to some fraud, or the perpetrator of a jest against him.

Next morning he met Appleby Robinson, jovial and prosaic as ever, inquiring jocularly:

“How are you getting on with Cousin Wilhelmina?”

“Oh, famously, or at least I flatter myself so. I have been invited to dinner and given the freedom of the house.”

“She must like you, then, or you would never have got a second invitation, and she’s devilish hard to please, and fastidious. Those spoiled beauties continue so all their lives. She’s a jolly old girl, though, and capital fun when she likes.”

“She’s very bright, and her memory’s wonderful.”

“Yes, and she’s fond of a joke; likes to take a rise out of the youngsters when she can.”

There was something in this latter speech which made Travers Preston vaguely uncomfortable, but his friend said no more, being interrupted by the ticking of the telegraph. It was in a broker’s office, and both men at once gave their attention to the message which was being transmitted, and in which both had an interest. Travers Preston plunged into the vortex around him, forgetting the singular whimsicalities and sentimentalities in which he had been recently involved. Never had he shown himself shrewder or more hard headed than in his operations that day amongst the bulls and bears. Absolutely cool, unruffled and serene, he went in heavily on certain shares and emerged triumphantly, the richer by several thousands. Fortune seemed almost inevitably to favor him in his speculations, as if that capricious dame delighted to pour gifts into hands that held them but carelessly.

As he started to walk up town that day, he saw at a street corner, in a comparatively quiet spot just behind old Trinity, a little old woman selling apples. She wore a dark drugget gown and a checked apron; a heavy shawl was pinned over her shoulders, and a black hood protected her head from the keen blast which blew up sharply from the North River that morning. The apple woman was the very pink of cleanliness, and her stand was, likewise, beautifully neat, with its rows of shining apples, alternating with oranges and a meagre pile of nuts. Something in the wrinkled face attracted Travers Preston. He looked at her wistfully. No doubt she said her Beads, as his mother used to do, and went to daily mass. In all the mad, rushing world which came and went there, where the tall spire of the ancient church pointed continually heavenward, perhaps this one human creature, this insignificant vendor of fruit, alone kept her mind fixed upon the eternal verities.

The young man stopped, by a sudden impulse, purchasing a measure of nuts as an excuse, and putting them with much reluctance into his silk-lined pocket.

"You are an Irish woman?" he said, presently.

"I am that, your honor. I was born on the banks of the River Suir."

“You are a Catholic?”

“Oh, then, thanks be to God for that same, I am a Catholic and all belonging to me.”

The shrewd old eyes, kindly and humorous withal, were scrutinizing this “grand, fine gentleman, that wasn’t above passin’ the time of day to an ould body like meself.”

“I am sure you say your Rosary,” the young man remarked next.

“Faix, and I do. Every night of my life before I sleep, and whiles I do be sayin’ it here, in the sunshine, when business is slack with me.”

She produced a pair of large, black, well-worn beads, in corroboration of her words.

“I say it as I sit here for the livin’ and for the dead, too; for them belongin’ to me that’s under the sod.”

“Look here,” cried Travers Preston, abruptly, “will you say it for me?”

Again, the old woman peered into his face. What would the likes of him be askin’ a simple old body to tell her Beads for him? Her instinct, however, which was seldom at fault, quickly told her that the gentleman was not “makin’ game of her, anyhow.”

“Deed then, and I will,” she promised, earnestly. “Whatever trouble or sorrow is on you, I’ll say my Beads for you this very day.”

"You see, it's this way," Travers Preston exclaimed, "my mother used to pray and say her Rosary, and when I was a youngster I said it with her. She is dead now a good many years, and, living in the world as men of the world mostly do, I've forgotten all about those things. I never pray now."

"Lord save us!" ejaculated the old woman, in pious horror. "And you the son of a Catholic mother? Well, fine gentleman and all, as you are, I tell you to your face, that I'd rather my son was lying where he is, under the sod, than hear him say such a thing as that."

Travers Preston felt a flush of shame pass over his face at this rebuke, and he bent his head, as though it had been his own mother by whom it was administered.

"Is your son dead?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Aye, he's dead. It was a sore crush to me when God took him, but He knows best, blessed be His holy will!"

It seemed to the man of the world that those were sublime words to hear, there in that Mammon worshipping center, in the very heart of a money-getting populace, where, for the most part, the Creator and the eternal destiny of man were forgotten. The old woman wiped with the corner of her checked apron the tears that still

sprang to her eyes at the thought of her boy, though the grasses of twenty odd summers were green upon his grave, and the young man, watching her, was conscious of an unwonted lump in his throat. Having wiped away her tears, the vendor of fruit exclaimed, cheerfully:

“Anyhow, sir, you’ve kept the faith, and that in itself is somethin’.”

“Yes, I have kept the faith,” answered Travers Preston, “but that is all. For many years I have never prayed and I have never gone near a church. The people around me thought it was all right if they injured no man, and if they led ordinary decent lives. But I knew better.”

It was a curious sight to see this cynosure of fashion, this cynic, this dilettante, who had mingled with the great world in many cities, and was familiar with its many sided variety, standing thus conversing humbly and simply with an illiterate vendor of apples. It was because of that very faith which led him to reverence in her a creature unspotted from the world, one of those who, amid the humblest avocations, daily see God.

“Oh, well, things are not so bad with you as they might be, sir. It’s His grace that’s kept you from worse evil, and from all the wickedness that’s goin’ on in the world about us.”

“You won’t forget to say your Beads for me, in any case?” Travers Preston repeated. “You see, I need your prayers, though it isn’t exactly because of trouble or sorrow, as you seem to think.”

Then he laughed.

“Tell me,” he added, “do you believe in witchcraft?”

“The Lord between us and harm, why do you be talkin’ about such things?” the old lady cried, in alarm, adding, almost immediately, with a shrewd twinkle in her eye:

“Och, sure and I can guess the kind of witchcraft that would be on a purty young gentleman like yourself. Its a colleen’s bright eyes that’s put a spell on you, and the best cure for that is a goold ring.”

“The cure’s a long way off,” laughed Travers Preston, “unless your prayers can help me to it.”

“Tell me now, asthore,” the old woman asked, warming with the instinct of her sex into eager curiosity at the hint of a love story, “is she one of ourselves?”

Travers Preston had not thought of this contingency, and he was puzzled how to answer. Somehow, he felt sure that she was a Catholic, though he could not have told why. Miss Mary had declared that Cousin Wilhelmina belonged

to what she called the Romish religion, and it seemed likely that this young relative, for relative she must be, would be of the same creed.

"I think, I hope, she is," he cried, impulsively. "In fact, I am almost sure."

The old woman had been watching him, anxiously.

"Well, if that's the case," she said, "I'll pray every day I rise that you may get your heart's desire. For, with a mother sittin' above in glory, as I pray yours may be this day, and a sweet young crature of a wife, to ask God's blessin' on you, there's no fear but you'll do well yourself."

Travers Preston, in all his infatuation, had not gone so far as this, nor ventured to dream of a time when he should have wooed and won that beautiful image, who was scarcely more, as yet, than a fascinating abstraction, a star upon the dull horizon of a life that had grown stale and unprofitable. He was half startled at the old woman's blunt reference to a possibility which he had scarcely dared to admit to himself. There was no denying, however, that it was a delightful one, and that it made the blue sky overhead seem bluer and the familiar scene of bustle and confusion as idyllic as though it had been some pastoral landscape, while the old

woman appeared to wear quite a halo, and her apples to be the ambrosial fruits of paradise.

"I'll pray for you night and day," repeated the apple woman, making a solemn gesture with her right hand to emphasize her words, "for the sake of my own boy that's under the ground, and for the sake of your mother that's gone."

Here was the touch of nature that made all the world kin, that united this man of fashion and the apple woman in her utter lowliness and obscurity, a common sorrow, a common loss; above all, a common belief.

"I'll pray that you keep the faith, aye, and put it in practice, too," the old woman went on. "And that you may get the purty colleen you have set your heart upon, if it be the blessed and holy will of God."

A smile broke over Travers Preston's face, warm and kindly, as the sunshine that streamed around the old woman and glorified her.

"It will do me good to know you are praying for me," he said. "And I'm sure your prayers will be heard. My mother was a saint. She's praying for me, too, up above."

"Deed, an' she is, sittin' above in glory," the old woman agreed, "with Christ our Lord, an'

His blessed mother. No fear but she's prayin' for you."

The passers by, during the long colloquy, cast occasional glances at the singular and ill-assorted pair, who seemed so interested in each other's conversation, but in busy New York there is little time for inquiring into other people's affairs.

Before Travers Preston left the spot, he produced a bill from his pocket to pay for the nuts. It was a five dollar bill, which he would willingly have bestowed upon this acquaintance, but he had a delicacy in making the suggestion. Glancing, however, at the worn and shabby clothes, so clean and neatly mended, but so poor, it seemed absurd to hesitate:

"I want to pay you for the nuts," he said.

"Well, asthore, that's ten cents, but mebbe I can change the bill. Five dollars, is it?"

She poured into her lap a jingling mass of small coin, from a tin box which stood beside her, and began to count it over.

"The change doesn't matter," Travers Preston said, hastily. "I would be awfully glad if you would let me make you that little present."

"No, sir, said the old woman, firmly. "I'm obliged to you, all the same, and I thank you

for the kind wish, but I make enough with my little stand here to keep body and soul together. God's very good to me, sir, and I'm not in need of anything."

Travers Preston put the bill back into his pocket, and said:

"I have ten cents here. I won't give you the trouble of making change."

And he went his way, admiring the sturdy independence of character which declined to accept assistance, and contented itself with the pittance that supplied the humble wants. Before bidding the old woman good-day, he promised her:

"I will be sure to pass this way sometimes, and tell you how I am getting on—with my conversion and with the colleen."

"The blessin' of God be about you, every day you rise," the apple woman ejaculated, fervently, and somehow Travers Preston felt as if that benediction visibly accompanied him, cheering and invigorating his spirit. And it was no idle fancy, for surely the blessing and the prayer of the poor must be infinitely precious in the sight of heaven, since the spiritual so far outweighs the material, and since the lowly of earth are often mighty in the violence with which they seize upon the kingdom of heaven.

Love, the softener, the purifier, was already at work in the heart of Travers Preston. In fine natures, it is an uplifting influence, it brings forth generous and kindly impulses, it leads the lover to turn aside from what is base and mean and sordid, and to shun whatever may debase or degrade. In short, it becomes the reflection of that other love, whence it has its source.

Chapter XI.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

An idea occurred to Mr. Travers Preston by which he hoped to bring himself still more closely into touch with Cousin Wilhelmina's household, and at the same time to indulge in the luxury of studying that most fascinating of portraits at his leisure. He determined to ask permission to take a copy of the picture, in pursuance of the artistic studies, which he had carried on after his usual dilettante fashion. He lost no time in broaching the subject to the mistress of the household, who accorded the permission in her usual gracious way.

"Why sir," she said, "if the picture of my youth has sufficient interest, I am far too much flattered to refuse so pleasing a request. Perhaps, however, you also desire to reproduce the other portrait."

"The better one," corrected the young man. The old woman gave him a strange look.

“My better self—what I might have been, is that it?” she asked, with an expression in which amusement was blended with sadness. For like Miss Mary she had suddenly jumped to a conclusion.

“At my age, one regrets almost everything just when regrets are unavailing. You have my permission, however, to copy which you will. Come when you like. At any reasonable hour you will be free from interruption, as that second story is practically unoccupied.”

He thanked her most cordially and went away, rejoicing. The soft perfume of the cigar he smoked seemed fragrant as the roses of Arabi, the stars looking down upon him seemed unusually resplendent in their depths of azure, though they likewise looked down on that great Babel of a city where he walked solitary. Thus absorbed in his individual reflections, he might have been in a desert, so remote was he from those who hurried by, playing the game of life, all in their several fashions.

He lost no time in beginning that absorbing work, proceeding as often to the house with the peacocks and remaining as long as good taste permitted. It was a perilous study, for a man in whom the spark of love had been already ignited by that singular interview during the

ball at Sherry's. For he convinced himself more and more, as he proceeded, that the beautiful face he transmitted to his canvas was not, indeed, as he had at first believed, that of the aged woman below, in the zenith of her triumphs, but rather of that other, whom he had beheld for one brief instant as a flesh and blood reality. Or if it were, indeed, Wilhelmina as she had looked some forty years before, then that other, who was still living and breathing in the very glow of youth, was her image.

Sometimes, as he labored, it seemed to him that the lovely lips were about to speak, and that the smile in the eyes deepened as they met his gaze. That beauty as a whole and in each separate detail grew upon him and sank deeply into his heart, and kindled there the warm glow of a real affection. He invested the girl before him with all gracious and kindly attributes, he accorded to her a chivalric deference, and he felt inclined at certain moments to speak to her in the tender and caressing accents of devoted love.

It was a strange state of affairs, strangest of all in a man of Travers Preston's calibre, who would have been the first to smile at such an infatuation in any other. The human heart is, in fact, a curious and delicate instrument, which occasionally gives forth fullest chords when

most lightly touched upon. No arts, no coquetry of any actual woman could have excited in Travers Preston the emotions produced by the silent appeal of those smiling eyes, the unconscious beauty of that face and the symmetry of that form.

His whole heart and soul seemed to go out to her, and he felt, as he looked, that for her he could have sacrificed fortune and ease and luxury, almost life itself. It became no small matter for him to tear himself away each time from his task, and he spent much of his intervening leisure in longing to return thither.

One evening, he had called at the house for a talk with Cousin Wilhelmina, but finding her engrossed in a game of cribbage with a crony, he felt an intense desire to have a look at the portrait. Of course he was not in the habit of working after nightfall, but he asked permission now of the old lady to observe a few details by electric light. She smiled at him, her weary but quizzical smile, and granted his request.

"That portrait painting is a very absorbing pursuit," she observed.

"Yes, especially when one has such models," Mr. Travers Preston replied, with a bow, and pleading his unwillingness to disturb the game

of cribbage, mounted hastily to the second floor.

He found himself quite alone in the broad corridor, where the two portraits hung spectrally together. He did not at once switch on the electric light, for a full moon was pouring its radiance through a window near at hand, and illumining the two pictured figures, so like, yet so unlike. Passing by the first, Travers Preston stood before the second, with an inexpressible longing in his heart to hear that voice again, which he had heard already twice, and to solve the mystery which seemed to keep him forever in miserable suspense.

As he stood thus a sound broke upon the stillness, a few chords struck upon a piano, and presently the first notes of a song. The voice was rich and full, perfectly modulated, artistically trained, and the song was that particular German romance which he had once asked Miss Mary Robinson to sing. He remembered, just then, with a flash of intuition, how the latter had replied to his request, declaring that when men heard it from the lips of Wilhelmina they felt impelled to fall at her feet. He listened entranced for a moment, then moved near and gradually nearer to the music room, whence the sound proceeded. He would have given worlds to see the singer's face, but he dared not advance too far.

At last the song came to an end, and the last notes of the accompaniment, and then the listener heard another voice, which he recognized as that of Miss Appleby Robinson, and it said:

“How divinely you sing. I remember once telling your admirer, Mr. Travers Preston, I mean, how exquisitely you sung that song.”

She broke into a merry laugh at some thought which her words had recalled:

“I found out afterwards that he altogether misunderstood me, and oh, dear, how very funny it was. He thought I was speaking of Cousin Wilhelmina downstairs.”

“What is all this nonsense you are talking?” said a voice, which set Travers Preston’s pulses tingling. “And why are you always bringing in that poor man’s name?”

“Because, dearest, he and I were playing at cross purposes about you for the first few weeks of our acquaintance, and also because I believe he is half in love with your portrait, at any rate.”

“How absurd.”

“Is it so very absurd? Why, no man could help it, and especially a man with the soul of an artist and the chivalry of an ancient knight. Did you ever see him?”

"No—well, yes, perhaps I did, once."

"And what were your impressions?"

But at this point Travers Preston drew back guiltily, conscious that he had been an involuntary listener, and afraid, perhaps, of what he might hear. He paused to brace himself for the effort, and boldly entered the room. As he did so, the two girls started up in alarm, and he found himself face to face with Miss Mary and that other—who, save for the difference of the dress, softened and etherealized by the moonlight, might have stepped down from the frame in the corridor. Mastering his emotion, he hastened to reassure the two, and turning to Miss Mary said, with a voice which trembled in spite of himself:

"May I ask you, Miss Mary, to introduce me at last to Cousin Wilhelmina, the younger?"

And in another instant, his hand had closed over the small and delicate fingers which Wilhelmina, after a moment's delay, extended.

"It seems to be my fate to offer you apologies," he said, in a slightly lowered tone. "May I hope that all my transgressions, past and present, are forgiven?"

"And some may as well be forgotten, too," said Wilhelmina, with a smile, which struck as a barbed arrow to his heart. "It is very often the wisest way."

"Wisdom has so little to do with it," Travers Preston answered, speaking almost as lightly as she did, but his eyes spoke another language, and the girl, after a short pause, turned away.

Miss Mary, who did not altogether understand this by-play, relieved the momentary silence.

"I suppose I should ask forgiveness in my turn," she said, "but I did not deliberately plan a mystification, you know. I was quite unaware, at first, that you were confusing my two cousins, one with the other."

"You have amply atoned for it, now," the young man said, with a slight glance towards Wilhelmina, who stood looking out through the broad window near the piano, at the moonlit streets of Manhattan.

"I am surprised," said Travers Preston, trying to lead the subject back to a more commonplace ground, "that I never saw this other cousin at the Thursday evening receptions."

"I was at almost every one," Wilhelmina said, suddenly turning to him with a laugh, "only you never came into the farther room, where I was supposed to be receiving."

Travers Preston mentally execrated his own stupidity.

"I think I saw you once," he said, "standing behind the other Cousin Wilhelmina's chair."

"Very likely," she replied carelessly, "though, of course, I can't remember. In future, no doubt, we shall meet oftener."

"Yes, I hope we shall meet oftener," Travers Preston said, and the words, quietly uttered as they were, sent a flush to the cheeks of the girl who listened, and reminded her, in her own despite, of those other words which she had heard from this man on the evening of the dance at Sherry's. He did not, however, commit any indiscretion upon this occasion, but ceremoniously took his leave, with a few further words of explanation, as to his presence in the corridor, and his appreciation of the music.

BOOK THREE

Chapter XII.

IN THE ITALIAN QUARTER.

When Mr. Travers Preston came to analyze his feelings he was glad of many things. In the first place, and above all, that he was done with mere abstractions, and that he had met, in the ordinary converse of human life, the only woman in whom he had ever been vitally interested. But he was also glad that she lived in, and was part of, the house with the peacocks.

It seemed to be the proper setting for that jewel, while it completed and formed a fitting climax to his romance. He was also well pleased that she should be a near relative of that old woman, who was in herself charming and had been a famous beauty, a second Cousin Wilhelmina, in fact, whose youthful attractions were invested with the glamor of the past.

In this frame of mind, he went strolling about in his desultory fashion one morning, when the light of heaven seemed in harmony with his thoughts. He tried to piece together the various impressions that Miss Mary Robinson had given

him of her cousin, many of which had appeared to him ridiculous when applied, as he had at first supposed, to her elder relative. Now, they fell far short, in his estimation, of the subject.

His peregrinations extended on that particular occasion to the Italian quarter of the metropolis, partly with a view to obtaining new ideas for his artistic studies, and partly for a mere change of scene. The streets there were mostly narrow, and the dwellings apparently containing a swarm of inhabitants. At the doors stood florid, highly-colored women, with the dark eyes of their race flashing merrily, and their black hair half concealed beneath brightly tinted kerchiefs. Strings of variegated beads encircled their necks, and gave a touch of brightness to a scene which would otherwise have been squalid. A few men, idlers in the market-place, lounged about with swarthy faces, puffing away at short pipes, which they removed occasionally to show their white teeth in a broad grin.

Children abounded, and sturdily indifferent to dirt and squalor, showed happy faces to the light of heaven. Perhaps they brought a share of their inheritance, the kingdom of God, which is theirs by right, down to the sordid level of those fetid purlieus. For they imparted an air of innocence, of mirthfulness, of happy unconsciousness to the whole environment.

While Travers Preston sauntered along, dressed as unobtrusively as possible, in tweeds and a soft felt hat, to avoid attention, he suddenly chanced upon a spot which appeared as an oasis in this desert. The street just there was wide, and consequently more cheerful, and a tenement house of the cleaner and better sort had just opened its doors to a group. This consisted of an aged woman in the picturesque garb of her race, with deeply wrinkled, nut-brown skin, and phenomenally bright eyes, a couple of sturdy children, a young Italian girl, who stood somewhat pensively apart, and another figure. With a bounding of the heart, a sudden joyful leaping of the pulses, Travers Preston recognized this last.

An oasis was no longer a sufficiently strong word for that particular block in an unsavory street, which had become a corner of Paradise, where vernal flowers and golden fruits should have blossomed. Wilhelmina was dressed very simply. She was totally without adventitious aids to beauty, and yet to the eyes that gazed she had never seemed more beautiful than there, where a mission of love and mercy had called her.

By an involuntary movement, Travers Preston stepped into an adjoining doorway. He had no wish to interrupt that charming scene.

He literally trembled, in fact, lest the girl should have discovered his presence. But no, she remained perfectly unconscious, her face fairly shining with pleasure, her lips laughing, as she tenderly supported the faltering steps of the aged Italian. To her skirts clung, with fat, chubby hands, two bambini, loosely clad in garments that seemed fragments of a rainbow.

Wilhelmina presently broke silence, speaking in the beautiful Italian tongue, which the listener, who had spent much time in Rome, perfectly understood. She spoke softly and gently to the old woman, interrupting herself occasionally to address to the clinging children one of those terms of endearment, wherein the Tuscan tongue pre-eminently abounds. In each of these she aimed a new dart at the listener's heart, which was beating with a warm human love that he would once have thought impossible. As the party walked slowly up and down, so that alternately Wilhelmina's face, or the back of her gracefully poised head, were turned to the observer, she addressed some word of instruction, or taught some little prayer to the little ones. From time to time the grandmother, in feeble, tremulous tones, supplemented these simple teachings.

"Oh, yes, my little ones," she exclaimed, "the beautiful lady whom the good God and the

Madonna have sent to us, will teach you, as I can no longer do, to pray to the good God."

Travers Preston felt inclined to take off his hat in presence of this little drama of peace and purity. The burden of his own unworthiness seemed suddenly to oppress him, and even the light, joyous laugh which Wilhelmina occasionally gave at the children's remarks, seemed to belong to a world wherein he had no part.

He noted that every woman of the quarter, who passed, saluted Wilhelmina as a familiar acquaintance, while the men took off their hats, with a deep movement of respect. The Italian pastor, approaching once, paused and said a few words to each of the group. He knew Wilhelmina well, as a valued and zealous co-operator, both with time and money, in all his good works.

"So, my child," he said, "you are here again, amongst God's little ones, gathering jewels for Paradise? Continue, continue; life is not long, and soon you shall see its gates open."

He passed on his way, and the children began to petition "the beautiful lady" to sing them the hymn of the Madonna.

"Sing in the street, Matteo mio?" cried Wilhelmina. "Why, we should have a crowd very soon, and a policeman coming to disperse us."

"Sing low, sing low!" the children impertuned. "Like you did when our baby Maria died."

The eager, young petitioners would not be denied, and Wilhelmina, passing her disengaged hand caressingly over the curly head of the boy Matteo, began to croon in a soft low voice a simple air, which was well known to the group, but which to Travers Preston seemed the sweetest song he had ever heard. The old woman, raising her weak, cracked voice, likewise joined in the hymn to the Madre Santissima.

"My lady," she said, when the hymn was finished, "I am very old, and it will not be long before I hear, by the mercy of Christ, the songs of the angels, and see the face of the most holy Mother. I have lived so many years, and yet it seems but yesterday since I was young."

There was something infinitely wistful and pathetic in the eyes which looked into Wilhelmina's, and those of the girl were darkened with pity and comprehension.

"But," added the old woman, "I must not complain, since the good God has given me many days upon earth, and he will grant me, when my sins are forgiven, a place in His kingdom."

The light of Christian hope was on her face, chasing the momentary sadness, as sunlight

chases the mist, and by a sudden flash of memory, the onlooker recalled the worn, querulous, disillusioned face of the elder Wilhelmina. He recalled her dreary philosophy of life, and her scarcely veiled disbelief in a future existence.

"That is beautiful, is it not?" piped out the old woman. "A place in the kingdom of our great Father."

"Yes, it is beautiful," assented Wilhelmina, earnestly. "And we are like children, feeling our way there. So, weak and old, He will take you one day very gently into the bosom of His mercy. But, now you must be tired. Perhaps you had better go in and rest."

She passed her unoccupied arm about the bent and aged form and led the woman tenderly towards the house. Travers Preston still waited, in a species of awe. Wilhelmina's familiar discourse with this old woman, trembling on the verge of the grave, who yet looked forward with assured hope to a life of glory beyond, impressed him deeply, and reminded him of another humble acquaintance, the old Irish woman, who had promised to say her Rosary for him every day. It also recalled his own mother, who, in the glitter and whirl of fashionable life, had preserved, as this young girl likewise seemed to do, her faith, her religion, intact. He was pondering whether or no he had better beat a retreat,

while there was yet time, but as he hesitated, Wilhelmina emerged once more, and advanced to where Carola still stood warming herself in the sunlight.

"Why do you look so doleful, Carola mia?" she said, kindly. "Is it the toothache, or what?"

"No, Signorina, it is the heartache!" the girl answered, solemnly.

Wilhelmina began to laugh.

"You, child, with the heartache, and for what?"

"For Pietro," Carola answered, honestly. "It is the fiddling, always the fiddling. When he might work and gain money for our home that is to be, he fiddles. We are betrothed, the priest has blessed our ring, but we cannot marry till he makes some money."

"You are wise there," interrupted Wilhelmina. "But can't you stop him fiddling?"

Travers Preston thought it almost heartless of the Signorina, to put on so droll an expression in face of the girl's sentimental grief. His fellow feeling with all true lovers made him experience a just indignation against Pietro for presuming to fiddle.

"I told him I would make him stop, even if I had to break the fiddle over his head," cried the girl, vehemently.

At which Wilhelmina laughed more merrily than ever, reflecting that it was little wonder that Pietro did not seem so very eager to enter into the state matrimonial.

“Why, you will bring your Pietro into a purgatory, if you are going to treat him like that,” said Wilhelmina. “But what is his defense?”

“Oh, he has a wheedling tongue, has Pietro,” cried the girl. “He says that he loves to fiddle so that I may dance, and that even if I am not there, the music speaks to him of me, and—and—”

She hesitated, and Travers Preston thought that he sympathized with the poor fellow.

“And he says he loves me so much that he cannot work.”

“Oh!” said Wilhelmina, and there was a ring of contempt in her voice. “I shouldn’t care for that kind of love. I should want the kind that made a man work better and be in every way stronger.”

Travers Preston felt somewhat guilty. He had never been what might have been called a strenuous worker, or at least he had extended his activities over so wide a field, that they had never seemed to produce any definite results. Since his acquaintance with Wilhelmina, he had certainly worked less than ever.

"I do not know," interposed the Italian girl. "I think we take the kind of love men have to offer, that is, if we care for them. I would rather have Pietro's love than any other kind of love."

The listener's face plainly showed her dissent from this opinion. Probably, however, experience had proved to her the futility of argument in such cases. Possibly her impartial judgment told her that the foreigner, from her point of view, was right, and was anxious to show her loyalty to her absent lover.

One thing seemed clear, that if Pietro's head were to be broken, it was by her own hands.

"Has the Signorina ever had a lover?" the girl asked next.

A wave of color broke over Wilhelmina's face at the point blank directness of this question, and Travers Preston drew far back into the doorway, feeling that he had no right to hear the answer. It reached him, nevertheless, in the girl's clear, penetrating tones.

"No, I don't think I have ever had what you call a lover, and, dear, if I were you, I wouldn't break any fiddles over Pietro's handsome head, but I should try to make him do what I wanted, all the same."

"Oh, the Signorina could make any one do what she wanted," the Italian cried, and Trav-

ers Preston thought she was a young woman of remarkable perspicacity.

"I am sure," continued Carola, warming to the subject, "that there are many noble gentlemen who would die for the Signorina."

This contingency had never presented itself to the hidden listener's mind, but he felt that he was quite prepared to live with all his might and main for Wilhelmina, if she were only willing.

"Well, I hope the noble gentlemen won't do anything so foolish," Wilhelmina answered, all the curves of her mouth and chin rippling into laughter. "They might leave me breaking my heart for some of them."

"The Signorina isn't breaking her heart for any one, now," the girl declared, shrewdly, "but that will come, and her chosen lover will be a very happy gentleman."

A sentiment in which Travers Preston fully concurred, but Wilhelmina, still laughing that laugh of pure enjoyment, cried:

"Well, I hope I shall never feel tempted to break fiddles or anything else over his head. But, now, good-bye, Carola mia, be kind to Pietro. Get him to work, and I shall come to the wedding."

With this farewell she turned away, and with her graceful, alert step was soon out of sight.

Travers Preston waited in the hallway till the last trace of her had disappeared, lest by any chance he might seem to commit the impertinence of following her. Then he emerged, with as careless an air as possible, hoping that he might escape Carola's notice. But the keen eyes of the girl observed him at once, his unusual appearance in that quarter attracted her attention. It was only some time afterwards that she connected him with Wilhelmina, and gave a low amused laugh. This was when Pietro, who had been trying to work at his trade of cigar-making in a big, bare-looking factory opposite, asked her, with some suspicion, and a spark of jealousy which was prepared to burst into a flame, "Why the gentleman had remained for two hours in the doorway?"

"The poor gentleman!" Carola said. "And she does not even know yet what it is to love."

Then she added gravely, after a pause:

"And it is not to my mother's daughter, Pietro, that you must ask such questions. There is no gentleman who comes here to see us of this quarter."

Pietro begged her pardon, and she was so pleased with him for his attempts at work, that she listened willingly that evening, while he played to her upon his violin, old Italian love songs and inspiring peasant ballads.

Travers Preston meanwhile walked up town deep in thought, reflecting upon all that he had witnessed that morning, and more than ever infatuated with the charming girl, whom he now knew was really Cousin Wilhelmina. In every particular she satisfied his fastidious sense, and it was not the least of her attractions that he felt she might be peculiarly hard to win. He could not help wondering why it was that he should have been brought, so mysteriously and yet so irresistibly, into contact with her, and after his many years of wandering and of association with numberless people, should suddenly succumb to her attractions, without the faintest effort on her part, almost before she knew that he existed. All life, however, he told himself, was a mystery. Its most trivial occurrences, its vicissitudes, its pantomimic unreality, the stars that shone above, the moon that came and went, tender and beautiful as early youth, the roses that adorned the spring, and the breezes that blew up from the sea; the thoughts, the emotions, the motives of those around each individual, his own sadness and his joy, are all mysteries. But deepest among them, perhaps, is the attraction which causes one heart to seek another, in the pilgrimage of life.

He was roused from his reverie by the voice of an acquaintance calling after him:

"I say, Preston, Preston!"

He stopped, of course, and waited till the other came up, though with no great relish for his society. He greeted him, however, cordially enough, and presently asked:

"Well, old man, how much did you put up on the gray?"

"Oh, by jove, I put up a pot of money on her and the jade lost the race. Did you have anything on her?"

"No, I didn't go into this race."

"Weary of all such follies?"

"Still more weary of wisdom," Travers Preston answered enigmatically, causing his companion to stare.

"You have such infernal luck when you do go into anything."

Travers Preston was wishing he could be sure of the same luck; just then, in another direction.

"But it's a long lane that has no turning," predicted the other. "You'll come out a cropper one of these days."

"Confound your prophecies," cried the lover, irritably. The remark had fitted in quite uncomfortably with his thoughts.

"Every dog has his day," pursued the acquaintance, imperturbably. "By the way, Pres-

ton, I wonder you never went in for matrimony, a rich girl and that sort of thing."

"Thanks!" said Preston, "but I haven't been reduced yet to offering myself for sale, even if there were any purchasers."

"That is a deuced clever way of putting things, but if I ever run my head into the matrimonial noose, it will have to be made of gold, d'ye see?"

"That would be a combination," said Travers Preston, "a wooden head in a golden halter."

The other laughed, uproariously, slapping his companion on the back, for he was the soul of good nature, and a very typical member of the illustrious society of golden youth.

"I say, that's fine," he cried. "I must remember it, too. It makes a devilish good story, even if it's against myself. Bye-bye, old chappie, I stop here." And he turned into the Holland House, where he just then had his quarters.

Chapter XIII.

THE OTHER WILHELMINA.

From that time forth Travers Preston became a still more eager visitor to the house with the peacocks, favored as he was by his position as old family friend, and by the partiality with which he was regarded by the elder Wilhelmina. If she were aware of the absurd mistake into which the young man had fallen, she said no word, though an occasional amused glance, kindly if ironical, seemed to denote that she had caught the clue to the mystery.

Her niece, on the other hand, treated her new acquaintance with a frank and unaffected friendliness, that gradually, however, as time went by, gave place to a slight and scarcely perceptible reserve, beyond which the ardent suitor might not in any way penetrate. It puzzled him, it piqued his curiosity, it stimulated his interest and increased his ardor. Notwithstanding the frequency of his visits, he scarcely ever found an opportunity of solitary conversation with this girl, who occupied so large a portion

of his thoughts, or of urging his suit, which had become the chief object of his existence. In the first place, the guests were numerous, and occupied the attention of Wilhelmina the younger, who, in a quiet and unobtrusive fashion of her own, dominated everything, blending with a curiously harmonious grace into the personality of her older namesake. Then, again, she was occasionally absent, leaving what Travers Preston felt to be an almost intolerable void in the atmosphere.

When it so chanced that the visitor really found himself in the presence of the young mistress of the household, he was perpetually conscious that the clear, radiant eyes of the girl must discover that secret, which he had not yet had the courage nor the opportunity to confess, and his manner was nervous and constrained to a degree that appeared inexplicable in a man of his experience and knowledge of the world. Matters might, nevertheless, have continued to run in a similar groove for an indefinite time, had not Mary Robinson constituted herself a species of good genius towards the expectant suitor. She took a keen interest, as she had done from the first, in the incipient love affair, and was eager for its successful termination. It was, therefore, through her kindly offices that Travers Preston somewhat unex-

pectedly obtained the desired opportunity to prosecute his suit.

One particular evening, on entering the familiar precincts, when the guests were comparatively few, he heard with a thrill of delight and an exuberant rise in his spirits, the voice of Wilhelmina the younger, who was receiving as usual in the farther drawing room. He steadied himself to bend over the hand extended to him by the mistress of the household, from her accustomed chair, before which was now drawn up a card table. Of late she had fallen into the custom, when visitors were not too numerous, of playing cribbage with a crony.

“So, Mr. Travers Preston,” she observed, “fortune has been kind to you this evening and has saved you from a disappointment.”

The young man murmured a protest, that was only half articulate, and Cousin Wilhelmina continued:

“You must not mind the liberty an old woman permits herself to take. So I to my cribbage and you to more agreeable society in the other room.”

Wilhelmina stood in conversation with an elderly beau, to whom she gave the same alert and gracious attention as to the youngest and most attractive of her admirers. She shook hands with Travers Preston and spoke a few

civil words, after which the young man had no resource but to stroll about the room, attaching himself to no special group and keeping a vigilant eye upon one central figure. These circumstances being noted by Miss Mary Appleby Robinson, who was herself much occupied by the attendant Professor, she devised a project which might relieve the situation, and whispered to Travers Preston one time as she passed him:

“Later on, when most of the people are gone, I shall try and get Wilhelmina to sing in the music room upstairs. This glorious moonlight is the very time for music.”

Travers Preston gave her a grateful glance and after that waited patiently, while the ancient beau spun out his platitudes and the various groups about the room began to melt away. At last there was no one left but the two who sat at cribbage and the elderly beau, who reluctantly took his leave. Miss Mary immediately took advantage of the situation to proffer her request:

“Now that that tiresome old man is gone,” she said, “do come up and sing for us. Mr. Travers Preston and the Professor are both devoted to music and they have scarcely ever heard you sing.”

Wilhelmina caught a glance of entreaty at the same moment from Mr. Travers Preston, who was standing near by, which caused her to turn:

away with a heightened color, though she graciously granted the request. With a brief word of explanation to the mistress of the house, who, absorbed in her game, merely smiled and nodded, the four went upstairs to the brilliantly lighted corridor and the music room, where the same flood of moonlight was falling over the piano.

"Wilhelmina likes best to sing in the moonlight," explained Miss Mary, who constituted herself mistress of ceremonies, "so we shall not switch on the lights in here."

And she took up her position at sufficient distance from the instrument, and at once engaged the Professor in conversation, so as to leave Travers Preston practically alone with Wilhelmina. She seated herself at the piano and began to run over the keys, playing various little snatches of melody and inquiring what every one wanted her to sing. Travers Preston and Mary with one accord asked for that German ballad, which was one of the girl's specialties and suited her exquisite mezzo soprano.

The chief listener, who very naturally took up his position beside the piano, could never afterwards express the sensations with which he listened, as the rich, young voice, interpreting with true dramatic instinct the Teutonic fire and passion, rose and filled the large apartment and

ascended to the vaulted roof. A passionate lover of music, Travers Preston responded to every chord, and the fascination which that exquisite and finished performance would in any case have exercised over him, was intensified by his feeling towards the singer and the absolute devotion which she inspired. In the rapt silence that followed the last notes of the ballad, and when Miss Mary and the Professor had once more become absorbed in their own conversation, Travers Preston repeated over, with a passionate, unconscious vehemence, the last phrase of the romance:

"My dearest, my heart's dearest, hear me, or I die!"

"How very tragic that sounds," Wilhelmina laughed, turning towards the young man and catching the expression of his eyes, as he said, earnestly:

"It is tragic to me. Your voice, while you sang, penetrated every fibre of my being, and if you could know how distractedly beautiful you look in the moonlight."

Wilhelmina made a gesture of distaste.

"I dislike flattery," she said, coldly, "and extravagance of any sort."

"I fear you will hate me, then, for I am extravagantly fond of you, as you must have

discovered long ago. Ever since that evening at Sherry's—"

"Which had better be forgotten," Wilhelmina interrupted, almost imperiously.

"At least forgiven," Travers Preston corrected. "I have never really had an opportunity to explain my unwarrantable conduct upon that occasion, and in point of fact, I have no excuse to offer, save that old excuse which has justified many a folly. After I had been haunted for weeks in the most singular fashion by the personality of your namesake and prototype, the beauty of half a century ago, I first saw the two portraits upon the evening of the ball. I perceived the difference between them, and yet I believed them to represent the same person."

Wilhelmina, letting her fingers wander idly over the keys, gave no trace of the emotion which she felt at the singular recital, wherein she had so marked an interest.

"What happened as I stood before those pictures," continued the young man, "is most certainly outside of a man's ordinary experience. I felt a kind of despair, as I realized that I was separated by a gulf of fifty years from the personage there represented, to whom my heart went out, instantaneously and irrevocably."

His eyes were upon Wilhelmina, as he spoke, but she listened silently, never turning towards him.

“Can you wonder then at the emotion which I felt, the joy, the rapture, when I beheld the original of the portrait, when I first saw you in the ball room at Sherry’s? You, with your fine poetic nature, must surely understand and pardon everything.”

“After all, there is very little to pardon,” Wilhelmina said, glancing at him with a faint, elusive smile. “Now, that I understand, it was merely the dream of a poet.”

“A dream that has become an intense and painful reality to me,” Travers Preston cried, in a low voice, that scarcely controlled his deep emotion. “A reality that has swept everything before it and left me entirely at your mercy. To say I love you, Wilhelmina, is to put the matter feebly, for there are no words that can express that love, and my hope that some day I may win you.”

So strong and convincing was the man’s sincerity, so vehement his utterance, that Wilhelmina could scarcely have checked him even had she so desired, or had his speech left her entirely indifferent. She had been intuitively aware before of Travers Preston’s sentiments in her regard, which he had been of no pains to hide.

Still, she was scarcely prepared for this outburst of feeling in the ordinarily self-controlled and unimpressionable man of the world, and the declaration came to her with something of a shock.

"It seems almost a hopeless thing," Travers Preston went on, while the girl still strove to analyze her own emotions and discover what her real sentiments might be towards this impetuous lover, "to expect that you reciprocate, and yet if your tender and compassionate heart can feel so acutely for the poor, surely it can find some sympathy for the suffering inflicted, however unconsciously, by yourself. Love, you know, is a beggar craving the merest crumbs. Tell me, Wilhelmina, have you anything to give?"

Into the girl's eyes had crept a softness that augured well for the lover's hopes, but she answered, in her low and even tones:

"Can one always be certain that what is called love is not merely a passing fancy?"

"That is merely trifling with what is a vital fact to me," Travers Preston responded, almost sternly.

"No, it is not that," Wilhelmina expressed. "I am trying to express my meaning. Love so often seizes upon an object seen in holiday attire, and therefore it does not stand the wear and tear of ordinary existence."

The lover thought as he listened, his eyes fixed upon the clear profile, the eager, mobile countenance, that no prose of ordinary circumstances could rob this girl of her subtle charm.

"And that is why," she continued, earnestly, "that it is not wise to trust to our mere feelings and inclinations, which may be only transient. We must take time to think and to realize how serious life is, and how much real love means."

"It means heaven upon earth," murmured the lover, fervently. "Oh, if I could hope or believe that you would ever care for me!"

"I shall think of the matter in prosaic daylight," Wilhelmina answered, lightly. "And who knows what may be the result?"

"You are cruel."

"Only practical, in asking you to wait till we know each other better. Then, you might find out what a very commonplace personage is the lady of your dream, and I—well, I might discover that I had no capacity for loving."

"You will never discover that," Travers Preston exclaimed, emphatically. "Such a supposition is belied by every feature of your face, and above all by those lovely eyes."

"A truce to compliments," Wilhelmina warned. "They do not help things at all. I want time for reflection before I can make any promises."

She turned round upon the piano stool as she spoke, to put an end to the conversation, wondering that she did not see Mary and the Professor.

"They seem to have vanished," she exclaimed, rising at once and moving towards the door.

"They are walking up and down in the corridor outside," Travers Preston informed her, as he followed her into the hall.

"Yes, there they are, to be sure," Wilhelmina replied, perceiving the two figures in the distance. "We must wait for them here, I suppose."

While they stood waiting, Travers Preston observed, indicating the portrait on the right, which was illumined by the moonlight from a neighboring window, even more than by the electric jets:

"That is a beautiful picture, but it does not do anything like justice to the original."

Wilhelmina gave him one of her enigmatical and half mocking smiles as, indicating the portrait of the elder Wilhelmina, she inquired:

"What do you think of the other?"

The cold, imperious lineaments of that face were revealed with almost startling distinctness, while the beauty that had been smote upon the gazers with compelling force.

“It is you without a soul,” Travers Preston answered, and as Mary and the Professor just then joined them, Wilhelmina led the way downstairs. There they found the former queen of beauty and of fashion looking gray and old, and quite unconscious of the contrast she presented, still busily engaged at cribbage. As she saw the young people descending the stairs together, she gave them a glance that had something of wistfulness in its expression, and murmured under her breath:

“So the generations pass and the green earth goes upon its way.”

Chapter XIV.

SOME PRELIMINARIES ARE SETTLED.

Travers Preston acted very wisely during the next few weeks. He knew when to press the advantage he had gained and when to let it lie quiescent, guided by the unerring tact which he possessed through his long and varied experience of the world. He was never obtrusive; yet he did not let Wilhelmina forget that he belonged to her and that he gave her the exclusive right to his attention and consideration. In a hundred trifling ways, he reminded her of his existence, of his pretensions and of his attitude as an ardent and expectant suitor. To many men, Wilhelmina's manner during that period of suspense, might have been disheartening. To Travers Preston it was stimulating and increased with each day his love and his admiration. Through the veil of that reserve, wherein Wilhelmina enshrouded herself, he had always the light of a great hope in the few words which the girl had spoken upon that memorable night, though never by word nor sign did she further betray her preference.

The others stood by, as so many spectators of a drama, the outcome of which they could scarcely venture to predict. If the elder Wilhelmina had any thoughts upon the subject, she kept them to herself, and Miss Mary, who better knew and understood her young cousin, with the understanding that comes of sympathetic admiration, had no word to say. She was secretly hopeful, however, that her darling project of the union of these two, whom she declared to be made for each other, might be realized. She was quite convinced that the element of the unusual and the romantic, which had entered into the affair, had tended towards its happy consummation, for under ordinary circumstances the pair might never have felt the slightest mutual attraction.

Travers Preston, having made the position clear to the young girl herself, felt it incumbent upon him to do as much with regard to the elders. He sought an early opportunity of declaring his intentions to the old lady, who in his thoughts was still pre-eminently "Cousin Wilhelmina." She sat in that self same chair, before which he had first made his bow, and put up her lorgnette for a half-amused, half-satirical scrutiny of his face, while he took the seat indicated beside her.

"And so, sir," she said, after she had listened in silence to the hasty and embarrassed statement

of his views, "you came to this house for a brief chapter of romance, a page of old time history, and you have found—how shall I express it—"

"I have found happiness," answered the suitor, earnestly.

"Happiness, my dear Mr. Travers Preston," declared the old woman, "is to my mind very aptly described by a contemporary writer. He compares it to a castle, which in youth we perceive at a distance and which we are perpetually trying to reach. As we grow older the landscape darkens, and on a sudden we discover that the castle is behind us and that we have lost our way."

"Instead of losing, I have found my way," the young man replied, quickly.

"So much of youth, so much of faith, remaining at thirty-five," Cousin Wilhelmina said, looking at her visitor with a not unkindly intention. "Well, I will admit that you have found a very charming guide over that treacherous morass we call life. As sweetheart or as wife my niece will never weary you, because she will be a perpetual surprise. After all these years I do not know her yet."

She smiled as she added:

"But I need not expatiate on the theme, for a lover will always gild the refined gold and paint the lily."

She sank back in her chair while she spoke, looking old and weary, though the fire of youth was in her eyes when she took up the theme again:

“Speaking quite impartially and without regard to the claims of kinship,” she continued, “I may add that you have fully sustained your reputation for good taste and good judgment, and that in my opinion Wilhelmina is also to be congratulated.”

The young man hastened to explain that he had received no definite promise nor encouragement to his suit, but the old woman stopped him:

“You need not explain,” she declared. “Wilhelmina would never have tolerated your attentions unless she meant ultimately to accept you. I argue solely from the probabilities.”

The lover’s cheek flushed and his eye kindled, while Cousin Wilhelmina continued:

“I congratulate you, therefore, in advance, and I hope that even in my brief, remaining span of life I may see you both happy.”

Travers Preston thanked her warmly, being naturally gratified beyond measure at her words, which she presently qualified:

“Although,” she said, regarding him out of her clouds of chiffon, as if she were some spectre

done with the things of earth, "I must admit that I am an incurable pessimist. Do you happen to know those lines which are going the rounds just now? They are from the French, of course; they put things so tersely."

Travers Preston disclaiming any knowledge of them, the old woman, with excellent memory and remarkable modulation, recited:

"Our life is hard,
 A little love, a little scorn,
 A little kiss for love's reward,
 And so—good morn.

"Our life is vain,
 A little work, a little play,
 A little pleasure, also pain,
 And so—good-day.

"Our life is brief,
 A little dark, a little light,
 A little joy, a little grief,
 And then—good-night."

She concluded, characteristically, with a slight jar in the perfect harmony of her voice, as though of irritation:

"But, there, I have talked enough for to-day, and you are a lover, and pessimism is intolerable. You have my best wishes and my consent in so far as the matter rests with me."

The interview with Mr. Appleby Robinson, who was the young lady's joint guardian, in conjunction with the elder Wilhelmina, was briefer and more practical. He made no secret of his satisfaction at the proposed union, for apart from his friendship for Travers Preston and the ties of old association which had bound the families, the suitor was unexceptionable from every point of view. These preliminaries settled, there was nothing further to be done but to await the good pleasure of the chief actor in the drama, Wilhelmina herself. She pursued the customary round of her duties, she was more assiduous than ever in her devotions, and she began the conversion of Mr. Travers Preston to a more fervent life, by more than one timely word, or some wise suggestion.

"I am trying," the latter said to her one day, half jestingly, "to go back to my boyhood and to be once more a good Catholic. I had a mother who was a saint, and if I am fortunate enough to come under a similar influence, why my salvation will be assured."

This was a very artful suggestion on Travers Preston's part, and could not fail to produce an effect upon that decision with which Wilhelmina was occupying herself during the days and weeks which followed that romantic scene in the music room. The suitor, whom she so skilfully kept

at bay, meanwhile beguiled the tedium of waiting by many an interesting conversation with his whilom friend, Miss Mary Appleby Robinson. In that self-sacrificing fashion, peculiar to so many women, she was always willing to talk upon the one possible topic. She had at her command a fund of anecdotes relating to that cousin whom she so genuinely admired. She told of her school days, and her returning homeward as a sunbeam to brighten the old house, of her successes at the convent, and the enthusiastic affection with which she was regarded by teachers and pupils. She dwelt in detail upon her various gifts and her social triumphs, and the many admirers she had won without the smallest effort. She told, likewise, of the piety, only dimly understood by her own evangelical mind, of devotion to the poor, of kindly deeds and gentle words. All these things were so much fuel to the flame by which the lover was consumed, and he was never tired of listening.

One day he reminded Miss Mary of a promise she had made, to tell him the history of the second portrait, and in a very few and simple words the request was granted. On a certain occasion an old artist, who had once been famous, came to ask Wilhelmina if he might paint her in the precise costume which the elder

Wilhelmina had formerly worn. The young girl had no desire to have her portrait painted, and especially in so striking a costume. She, therefore, gave an unqualified refusal to the request.

The old man listened with a dejected air, saying, with a sigh:

"It was my only chance. They refused the last picture I sent in for the academy. I shall never send another, and you are quite right in preferring some younger artist."

The words went straight to Wilhelmina's heart. With tears in her eyes she gave him an immediate order for her portrait, and in the desired costume. And so successful was the accomplished work that it gave the aged painter a second spring of popularity and success, which cheered his last years of life, and lent even to his departure hence a certain sweetness.

"The incident is worthy of her and of her portrait," Travers Preston commented. "But everything I hear makes me realize how little I deserve her love."

Mary Robinson looked at the young man with her honest, kindly eyes, and said in her sensible fashion:

"Women are always supposed to be better than men, and the best women like the work of conversion."

If she only cares enough to try," Travers Preston exclaimed, desperately.

"Perhaps she will try, whether she cares or not," laughed Mary, though she had her own private notion of the matter, as has been said, and was quite firmly convinced, in fact, that Wilhelmina regarded Travers Preston with favor. She did not, however, confide her impressions to the lover, considering that a few weeks of suspense could do him no possible harm.

"Whatever comes or goes," said the young man, gratefully, "I owe a great many happy hours to you."

"I brought you here," assented Mary.

"And showed me the portrait."

"And had hard work to convince you of the reality of Wilhelmina's charm."

"You mean that you practised a cruel mystification upon me."

"Quite unconsciously."

"At first, perhaps."

Mary flushed, as she admitted:

"After that I saw there was no further need for my intervention."

"And perhaps you were cruel only to be kind."

At which Mary could not refrain from throwing out a word of consolation: "All's well that ends well, and faint heart never won fair lady."

Chapter XV.

TRAVERS PRESTON OBTAINS A PROMISE.

All these preliminaries being settled, Travers Preston was very anxious to secure from Wilhelmina herself some definite assurance, which would put an end to his suspense, and banish him forever from her society or place him in the position of an accepted suitor. At the last Thursday evening reception for that season, the question was mooted of a dinner which was to be given in honor of the twenty-first birthday of the young mistress of the house. And in allusion to the proposed festivity, Cousin Wilhelmina said:

“I am going to be kind to you, Mr. Travers Preston, and let you take into dinner the heroine of the occasion.”

Travers Preston expressed his gratitude so heartily and spontaneously, that the old lady added:

“And it appears to me that it would be an excellent opportunity to announce the engagement.

"But," stammered the young man, "we are not engaged. As I told you before, I have not been lucky enough to get any promise from Wilhelmina. She knows, of course, how I feel about the matter, but she begged me to give her time."

"How much time does she require?" frowned the imperious lady of the chair. "Talk to her about it this very evening. She ought to know her own mind before now. There she is over there, conversing with that man of the eyebrows. I know she hates him. Go and take her away. She will be grateful for the service, and the contrast will be in your favor."

As Travers Preston still hesitated, turning a little pale and with all the humility which sprang from his innately refined and artistic nature, as well as from the fact of being deeply in love, the old woman tapped him sharply on the arm with her fan. This was her favorite way of attracting attention, and emphasizing something particular that she had to say.

"Go at once," she persisted. "Ask her to have an ice. Bring her into the conservatory. Above all, insist upon an answer. Wilhelmina will like you the better for showing your mettle."

Thus encouraged, Travers Preston crossed the room to where stood the young girl, who turned

to him with evident relief and readily accepted his offer of refreshments. She partook of an orange sherbet, talking with her usual lightness and ease, while her escort leaned against the wall beside her chair, nervous and constrained. Carrying out the second suggestion, which the mistress of the house had made, the young man afterwards led Wilhelmina artfully in the direction of the conservatory.

"There are, I hear, some beautiful new specimens," he observed. "Suppose we have a look at them."

"I didn't know," Wilhelmina responded, as they entered the fragrant, softly-lighted precincts, "that you took a particular interest in plants."

"I don't," Travers Preston confessed, bluntly; "I only take an interest in one subject at present. I have been trying all evening to have a word with you, and not this evening alone, but many others. I believe you persistently avoid me. Is it kind? Is it fair?"

Wilhelmina made no answer. Still leaning upon her escort's arm, she walked slowly down those aisles, bordered on either hand by luxurious masses of foliage, by splendid towering palms; recalling far off Eastern climes, by flowering cacti, by lotus blooms and perfume distilling magnolia.

“Is it kind, Wilhelmina?” the lover repeated. “When you know that I love you more than any words can say, though, indeed, I do not want to weary you with protestations. But I think it is time, dear, that you should give me an answer; at least put me out of suspense.”

The two had come to a standstill, as Travers Preston spoke thus, and Wilhelmina almost mechanically took the chair her companion offered. He remained standing before her with folded arms, while he continued:

“In asking you to marry me, I know very well that I am all unworthy. The best of men fall far short of your standard of perfection. But at least I can offer you a full and entire devotion, such as I have never offered to any other woman.”

Wilhelmina played absently with the leaves of a superb japonica, which stood near. Even in the rose flush of the conservatory her face was pale, her eyes tremulous, and perilously near to tears. Her ordinarily fluent speech was checked, and she was conscious only of a strange and almost exultant gladness which rose within her tumultuously as the rich and finely modulated voice beside her spoke those words that are only heard once, perhaps, in every life time with the same emotions. Something within her seemed to echo the few and simple but eager and impas-

sioned phrases with which the brilliantly gifted man beside her continued to urge his suit.

A love scene cannot readily be put upon paper, nor described with any prospect of success, since it consists chiefly of a series of emotions, wherein but two actors can be concerned. It is the manner of speech rather than the words; it is the tone of voice, the glance, the sympathy between soul and soul, heart and heart, which gives to such an interview its meaning. Some one had previously said that Travers Preston would make an ideal lover, because of the poetic and artistic feeling which underlay the superficial cynicism of a man of the world, and his capability for deep feeling. That feeling, so seldom aroused in his progress through the world, was all concentrated now upon this one object. He loved Wilhelmina with the full strength of his manhood, and he expressed that love with a force and earnestness which might have been painful but for the delicacy of sentiment and the gentleness that he knew how to put into his speech.

He was no ordinary wooer, as the girl he desired to win was no ordinary girl, and the whole circumstances of their acquaintance had been unusual in the highest degree. He remembered as he stood there, the despairing regret with which he had looked first upon her

portrait, supposing her to be a woman already aged, and recalled the joy wherewith he had discovered her to be an actual and living being.

And, by one of those curious turns of thought, Wilhelmina was confronted not only by the young man's actual expressions of love and devoted attachment, but by that first unconventional outburst which had so deeply stirred, while it had, likewise, offended her, in the ball room at Sherry's. He saw before him not only the beautiful girl in the conventional, present day attire, but likewise that dream lady of the flame-colored robe and the rubies, to whom he had given spontaneously a strange and almost weird devotion.

And this devotion, romantic and chivalrous, a something remote from the prose of the twentieth century, made a curious appeal to Wilhelmina, and drew her towards her otherwise conventional and altogether desirable suitor, as more prosaic circumstances might not have done. Perhaps that was why she was led to distrust her own emotions, and to feel a reluctance towards giving a final answer. She steeled herself resolutely with a characteristic strength and courage against that charm which she found in the presence of Travers Preston, and the influence that he had acquired over her. She had learned during the past weeks to watch for his coming.

and to be stirred by the sound of his voice in a fashion altogether outside the pale of her previous experience.

Nevertheless, the solemnity of the decision, which she had to make, appalled her, and she was startled when the young man begged for a definite answer, and if it were in the affirmative, to allow the engagement to be announced at the birthday dinner.

"But that is only two weeks from now," Wilhelmina exclaimed, with a catch in her breath.

"Is the decision so very hard to make?"

"It is irrevocable."

"An engagement is not altogether irrevocable."

"It should be, and I cannot give any promise until I know, until I am sure."

"If you loved me, dearest, one hundredth part as much as I loved you, the answer would be easy," Travers Preston exclaimed, fervently. "But there, I will not say any more. I will not try to influence you unduly. Only promise me something."

"If I can," Wilhelmina answered, seriously.

"It may seem a foolish thing, but I have it very much at heart. Should your decision be in my favor, wear the flame-colored gown and the rubies on the evening of the dinner. Then the engagement may be announced, and I shall

be the happiest of men. In the contrary case—well—I shall try to be as brave as possible, only I shall not take you into dinner.”

“It will be a novel way of making an announcement,” Wilhelmina said, the smile chasing the gravity from her face as sunlight chases clouds. “And if I wear the gown I shall look very much like an anachronism.”

“The loveliest in the world,” Travers Preston ejaculated. “The most adorable—”

But Wilhelmina restrained him by a gesture and declared, presently:

“It is such a small matter, however, that I think I can promise.” For, she reflected, that in the event of her answer being favorable to her suitor’s wishes, she could easily wear the gown, since the dinner guests included only the family; whereas, in the opposite case, which scarcely now seemed possible, painful explanations might be avoided simply by donning ordinary evening attire. She felt it right, nevertheless, to give one last warning to this ardent suitor, who stood now so intently regarding her with a veritable hanging upon her words.

“Oh, try to remember,” she said, earnestly, “that I do not know yet. I cannot be sure, and I almost wish you did not care so much.”

“Never wish that, whatever happens,” Travers Preston cried. “I shall always be better and stronger for having known and loved you.”

Wilhelmina broke upon the happy pause, vibrant with emotion that followed, by a return to her ordinary manner. She invited the young man to examine the new specimens, so that she should not feel she had been brought into the conservatory on false pretences. He accompanied her, as she moved in her light and graceful fashion amongst the masses of flowers and greenery, but it must be confessed that his eyes were more often upon his companion than upon the plants she diligently indicated, and that his speech was something irrelevant and cursory, reverting often to that one topic which engrossed his thoughts:

“Love, its burden and its pain,
Love that fears and hopes again,
Love that knows immortal youth,
Love surviving change and ruth,
Love that conquers death.”

Chapter XVI.

THE BIRTHDAY DINNER.

The evening of the birthday dinner at length arrived, and the house of the peacocks was fairly ablaze with light. Cousin Wilhelmina, the elder, seated in her favorite chair, clad in a brocade gown and masses of costly lace, disposed to conceal, as far as possible, the ravages of time, awaited her guests. They included all the relatives and connections of the family, a sufficiently large number. Amongst these were conspicuous, of course, the Appleby-Robinsons. Mary, looking quite pretty in a new gown specially procured for the occasion, conferred with the mistress of the household upon a point of mutual interest to both, and which gave to them a certain pleasurable expectancy and excitement unknown to the other guests.

When all were assembled in the quaint drawing rooms there was a pause. Wilhelmina, the younger, had not yet appeared. Travers Preston, in a fever of unrest and suspense, hung about those very stairs which he had mounted

upon that eventful evening when he had first seen the portraits. He stood with his back turned to the rest of the company, leaning upon the oaken railing and prepared to brace himself for whatever might be coming. His face was pale, his lips set and his eyes were fixed upon the turn of the balustrade. There was a buzz of conversation in the room, wherein all participated save the two, who, like the anxious lover, awaited that crucial instant. As a soft step was heard in the corridor above and the swish of garments descending, Cousin Wilhelmina leaned forward in her chair and Mary Appleby Robinson clasped her hands. It was a dramatic moment in the history of the old house. To the eyes of the lover there was the gleam of a gown, a radiant vision of youth and beauty. Cousin Wilhelmina sank back in her chair, Mary Robinson gave a little cry, and Travers Preston bent his head with a throbbing in his breast which almost suffocated him. For the first had seen the phantom of her own youth, the second the accomplishment of a cherished wish, and the third only knew that the gown was of flame-colored satin, and that the swan-like neck was encircled by blood-red rubies.

Wilhelmina's face was very pale, save for one scarlet flush of color in either cheek, the smiling lips were parted, the eyes, glowing like stars,

rested upon the joyful countenance of the expectant lover. He murmured a single word as his hand closed over hers. Then the elder Wilhelmina rose triumphantly from her chair and gave the signal to go into dinner. As she passed she whispered to Appleby Robinson:

“I hope you have your speech prepared.”

To which that gentleman responded by a nod and smile, his jovial countenance beaming with satisfaction. Mary's eyes were dim with tears as she silently accepted the Professor's arm, but she was not too blind to see that Travers Preston slipped upon her cousin's finger, as the two walked together towards the dining room, a costly ring which had belonged to his mother. And so the engagement was announced at that birthday dinner, and Mr. Appleby Robinson made the speech that he had provisionally prepared. Every one applauded that speech, which was held to be quite perfect and proceeded from the heart.

The two chiefly interested sat quite silent as they listened, occasionally exchanging a smile or a glance.

The cousins down to the very last degree were charmed with the prospective match, which was in so many ways an excellent one for their young kinswoman. But only a few felt as did Mary Appleby Robinson, when in little inarticu-

late sentences she murmured her gratification to her cousin, or congratulated Travers Preston on his good fortune.

"I knew you were made for each other," she declared. "I was sure you would fall in love with her as soon as you saw her."

"I did better than that," said the jubilant lover. "I fell in love, you know, before I saw her—with her portrait."

When he went to take his leave that evening of Wilhelmina the elder, the younger was standing precisely where she had stood upon that occasion, when he had momentarily perceived there her slender and graceful figure, and had supposed it to be a vision. She formed a complete antithesis to her older relative, but together they made a delightful picture.

"So, Mr. Travers Preston," said the old lady, "I am happy to be able to congratulate you on having won the prize."

"The beautiful niece of a beautiful aunt," answered the young man.

The old woman's faded eyes were wistful as she answered:

"Sir, when I wore that flame-colored gown, which Wilhelmina now wears, and had my portrait taken, there was something to be said.

That much at least it is pleasant to remember. Good-night, Mr. Travers Preston."

And Mr. Travers Preston, with a lingering look at the radiant vision behind the chair, meeting the lovely eyes and smiling glance which followed him across the room, went forth from the house into the star-sown night. He carried with him that last glimpse of the girl, in whose society he had so happily passed the greater portion of the evening, secure at last in the certainty of her love. Often then, and in his after life, did he bring her to mind, a slender figure having for its background that quaint room, clad in a flame-colored gown, her neck encircled by rubies.

On reaching his apartments that evening in an ecstatic state of mind, which displayed itself by a dream-like indifference to surroundings, and an exhilaration of spirits shining in every lineament of his face, Travers Preston took down from the picture over the mantel the peacock's feather that he had placed there as a challenge to destiny. Laughing in pure contentment, permeated by a happiness such as he had never before known, he held the trifling object an instant in his fingers.

"Since the years may be said to have gone backwards and age to have become youth," he

cried, "I remove this gage of battle and my foolhardy challenge to love. For I have met a woman for whom I might very easily have broken my heart."

And for a single instant his fancy led him backwards to the palazzo at Venice, to a particular sunny afternoon, and to the woman who had so unerringly predicted precisely what had come to pass.

Chapter XVII.

THE WEDDING.

It was presently announced in the various society journals that this wedding in high life, which was of such paramount interest to Gothamites, would take place in June. Preparations were actively carried on at the house with the peacocks, and fully occupied the future bride and many of her feminine relatives, especially Miss Mary Appleby Robinson. There was also the important matter of the invitations, concerning which the bride-groom elect was called into conference. He had comparatively little interest in that department of the affair. Most of his surviving kinsfolk were absent from New York, and his acquaintances were substantially the same as those of Wilhelmina.

But there was one person whom he desired to have present in the church, and he set to work in good time to compass the result. This was no other than his friend, the applewoman, with whom he had had in the interval more than one colloquy, and who, by her shrewd and practical

advice, had helped him not a little in that upward path whereon he had entered. The care-furrowed cheeks were wet with tears, and the toil-roughened hand grasped his own in a sympathy which was rare and precious to him, as he went to inform his humble friend of the happy outcome of his suit to Wilhelmina. They talked together that day for an unusually long time, the fine gentleman humbly reviewing the progress he had made in the return to the fervor of his boyhood. He showed the old woman quite simply the Rosary which he now said every day, and boasted with an almost boyish eagerness that he went to mass regularly every Sunday, and approached the Sacraments.

"You see I want to be worthy of her," he exclaimed. "She is—well, she's an angel."

"She's a good, pious Catholic girl, at any rate, my dear," said the humble monitor. "And that's all you want now to keep you straight and bring you to heaven at the last. And listen to what I'm tellin' you; I'm as glad and thankful for that same, as if you were my own boy arisen from the grave, instead of the grand, fine gentleman that you are."

As he broached the subject of her presence in the church on the wedding day, the apple-woman made the very practical objection of her lack of suitable clothing. But this Travers

Preston overruled by begging her to accept from him such articles of clothing as were necessary.

"I want to have your prayers," he said. "I want to feel that you are there saying the Rosary for me, as my mother would have done, and bringing down a blessing on the marriage."

This was a plea which touched the kindly, honest heart that beat beneath the shabby attire, and Travers Preston gained his point. The applewoman promised to array herself in the garments which the young man was to procure, and which with a happy confidence she trusted would fit her exactly. Also to proceed to the particular church set forth upon the day appointed in the carriage that was to be sent for her conveyance.

Then, accompanied by her fervent benedictions, the fine gentleman made his way to a large department store, quite regardless, at first, of the difficulties attending his project. He was met by a very smiling saleswoman, who quite naturally beamed upon so promising a customer, and inquired:

"In what style, skirt pleated or plain, with or without yoke, trimmed with silk or satin?"

A collection of the most abstruse Greek terms could not have been more unintelligible to the

bewildered gentleman than these questions so propounded. He grasped, however, at the final suggestion:

"Oh, trimmed with satin, I suppose," he answered. And instantly a bewildering creation was displayed before him, a skirt and bodice to match, elaborately trimmed and in the very latest fashion. A vision of his humble acquaintance arrayed in this "confection" rose to his mind, and he could scarcely repress a smile as he exclaimed, hastily:

"I scarcely think that would suit the person for whom the costume is intended. Haven't you got anything plainer?"

"Plainer, yes sir. I can give you a perfectly plain skirt, with five, seven or eleven gores, just as you wish."

"I don't think I even know what a gore is," confessed Travers Preston, desperately.

"Is the costume for your wife, sir?" asked the shopwoman, solicitously.

"No, no, indeed," answered Travers Preston, flushing consciously. "I—I am not married. I want something very plain for an old woman."

"I should recommend a five gore skirt and this bodice."

"Very well," agreed the young man, suspecting that the bodice was the waist, which she held up for his inspection."

"Do you know the size at all?"

"It is for a medium sized and rather thin old woman," Travers Preston replied, grappling as best he could with this second difficulty.

"Oh, I think you may leave that to me," the saleswoman suggested. "I shall do the best I can, and alterations can be made if necessary. Will you require a coat to match?"

"I think a cloak would be better," the buyer responded, doubtfully.

Instantaneously every lay figure at hand was clothed in quick succession with a variety of capes, cloaks and other outer garments, suitable for spring wear. Travers Preston watched the swiftly moving saleswoman with horror. The affair was assuming the hideous proportions of a night-mare.

"Don't bring out any more," he cried, quickly arresting the vendor of these alarming articles of raiment in her phenomenally rapid career. "I don't know what I want. I shall have to send some one who can decide."

So saying he beat a hasty retreat, but having got as far as the elevator, which would convey him to safety and the ground floor, his natural courtesy induced him to return. He found the saleswoman divided between laughter and indignation.

"I am afraid I have given you a great deal of trouble," he observed, glancing apprehensively

at the spectral garments upon the lay figures. "And I do really want to buy, only I find I am unequal to the task. I shall send some one to choose a costume, and if you will kindly give your number, I shall see that the purchase is made from you."

Harmony was thus restored between the aggrieved shopwoman and the terrified gentleman, who sent a substitute for himself in the person of Miss Mary Appleby Robinson. It need scarcely be said that a suitable outfit was therefore provided for the venerable vendor of fruit, nor that she appeared at the church amongst all the brilliant guests, whom she called "the quality." Seated in an obscure corner of the edifice, she prayed down choicest benedictions on the youthful couple. As pearls of great price, the beads of her Rosary slipped through her fingers, and the Hail Marys arose, golden links in a chain which united earth with heaven.

To diverge an instant from the subject and glance into the future, it may be said that she sold apples no more upon the corner of the street, but in a comfortable little shop, where her generous benefactors, Travers Preston and his bride, paid her many a visit.

The bride had also her own special guests upon that auspicious occasion, chosen from

amongst the poor, whom she often called "God's friends." These were a group of Italians, notably the aged grandmother, Pietro, Carola and the children, who were likewise loud in blessings upon the *cari sposi*, the dear young wedded pair.

After the ceremony at the church, the wedding party returned for the nuptial breakfast at the house with the peacocks. As the carriage containing him and his bride drove up to the door, Travers Preston beheld with a rush of memories the plate-glass windows still staring at him like sightless eyes, the lawn lying greener and smoother than ever, and the gorgeous fowls, strutting vaingloriously in the sunshine. From the vehicle just behind alighted, as he looked, the mistress of the mansion, a wonderful old figure in satin and laces, who, leaning upon the footman's arm, slowly ascended the steps. Vividly the happy bridegroom brought to mind that other morning, when after the lapse of twenty years, he had stood before this dwelling and indulged in various conjectures as to its occupants. Rousing himself from that dream-like impression, he hastened to assist from the carriage that superlatively lovely bride, whom he had so triumphantly won, and who was no other, after all, than "Cousin Wilhelmina."

THE END.

